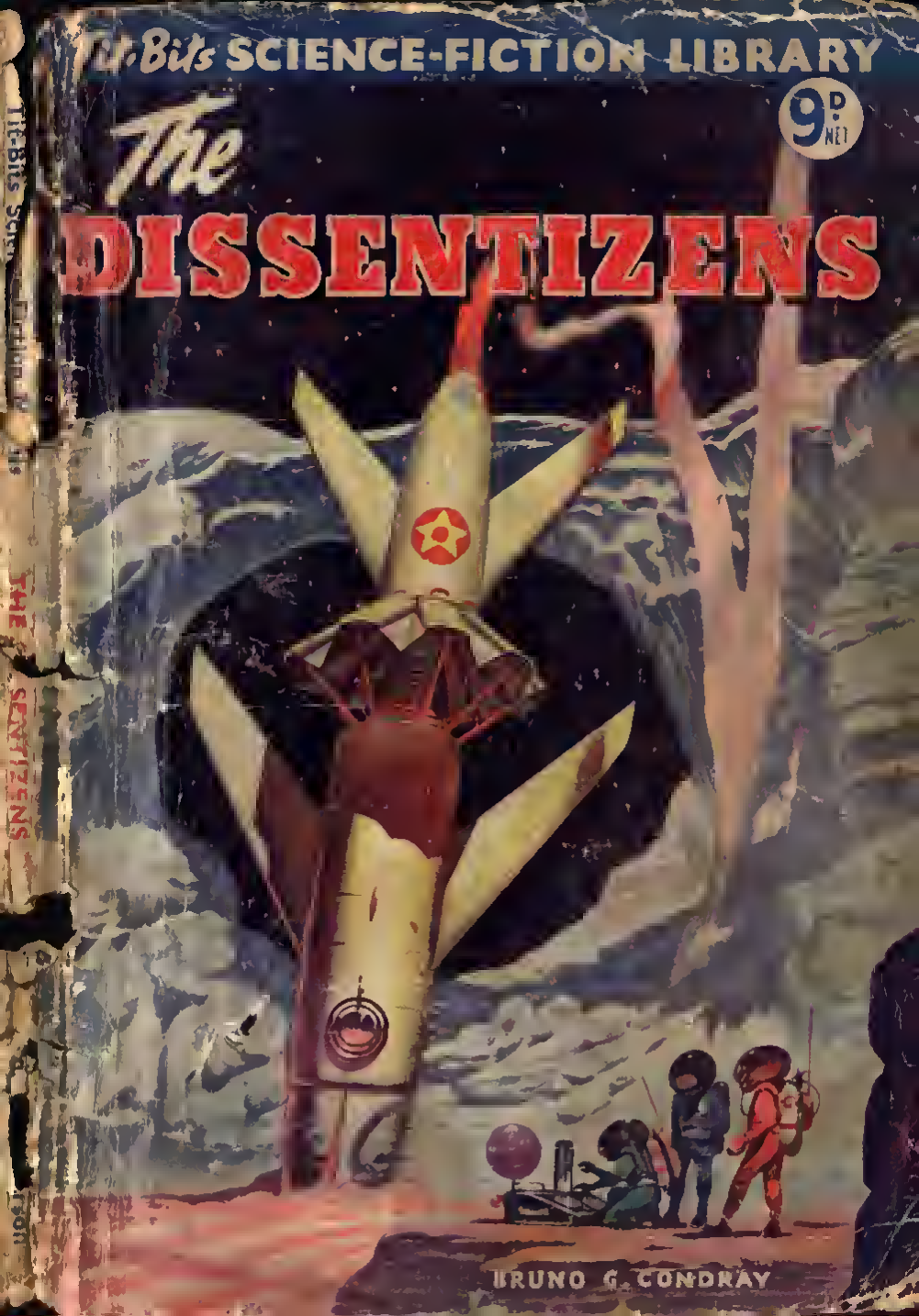

Tit-Bits SCIENCE-FICTION LIBRARY
9D. NET
The
DISSENTIZENS
BRUNO G. CONDRAY
Tit-Bits Science-Fiction Library
THE DISSENTIZENS

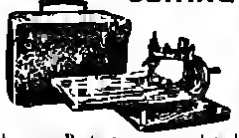
Lady's 'Cocktail' Wrist Watch

A Special Opportunity!

YOURS for 10/- deposit

Modern Square Dial & Oval Cocktail Glass 15 Jewel Lever precision Movement. Guaranteed Accurate timekeeper. Highly polished Chrome Front and Stainless Steel Back. Fancy Slide Links and Double Silk Cord. **Cash Price £6 18.6.** Delivered for 10 - Deposit. Balance 14 6 Monthly. **Deposit refunded if not approved.** Also in Brilliant Stay-gold". (Equal in appearance to Gold) Finished Front. **Cash Price £7.7.0** or 12 6 Deposit and 15 6 Monthly. Both Watches carry 12 months' Written Guarantee.

The 'ESSEX' SEWING MACHINE



Yours for 13/- Deposit

Capable of performing skilled work in every home. Perfect in every detail, with Chromium plated finish, complete for immediate use, with table clamp and full instructions. Six months' guarantee, universal satisfaction assured. Cash Price **£4.10.8** plus **2/-** carr. or **13/-** dep. and **2/-** carr. and bal by 7 monthly payments of **11/9.** Carrying Case **17/6** extra or **2 6** deposit and 7 monthly payments of **2 3.** Write for General Catalogue of Ladies' and Men's Wear and Household Goods, etc.

GABERDINE SUITS

YOURS FOR 20/- DEPOSIT

London Tailored Two-piece blended **Wool Gaberdine** Suit in the popular 'Town-Man' style. Self-supporting Trousers with adjustable waist straps. In Blue, Brown, Lovat, Fawn and Dunkirk. Chest sizes 34 to 42in. **Cash £8.7.6** or send **20 -** Deposit and **2/-** post and packing for 7 days' approval. Balance **25/-** monthly. Give Chest and Waist measurements and second choice of colour. Deposit refunded if not satisfied.

14 DAYS' TRIAL

FOR ONLY 5/- DEPOSIT

THE NEW Remingt "60"

The Fastest I trie Shaver in World. Shave t "Minute a day w with the Remington '60', Voltage A.C. 210-240. In Presentation Case. Cash **£9** or **5/-** dep. Balance **after trial 15/-** monthly payments of **24/-.**

Money back guar.

WATERPROOF Anti - Magnetic Fully Luminous

A Watch of Merit Yours for Deposit 10/6

A fine quality gent's 17-jewel lever flat model round design, luminous dial. In Brilliant Dengold (equal in appearance to gold). Gilt sweep second hand. Stainless steel back. Wide strap. 12 months' wr warranty. **Cash Price £6.12.6**—or **10 6** deposit for delivery on approval. Bal **15 - monthly.**

ALL WOOL

GABERDINE RAINCOAT

FOR 22/6 DEP

To-day's popular D.B. Ulster in proofed Wool Gaberdine. Full length Shirt Satin lining. QUILTED BACK interlined WOOL FLEECE for extra warmth and protection. Every coat carefully tailored to ensure smart and easy fitting. In this season's shades of Grey and Fawn. Size 34 to 42 Chest. Cash Price **£8.17.6** or **22 6** Deposit, **2/-** Post and Packing. Balance **25 -** Monthly. S.B Style. Price **£8.12.6** same

REAL DIAMONDS

Yours for 20/- Deposit

Real 18ct. Gold and Platinum Set Genuine Diamond Rings, vari Designs at **£10.10.0.** Yours for **20 -** dep. Bal pay. **20/-** mthly. Wri for list showing Bargains in **GOLD & PLATINUM SET DIAMON AND GEM RINGS** from **£5-£100.** Gold Signet Rings, Pearl Neckl and A.L. Jewellery. **All on Easy Terms from 5 - to £5 monthly.**

WRITE FOR LISTS. (*State which required*). 1. Coloured list of Ladies' and Men's Wear etc. 2, Ladies' and Men's Wrist Watches by Avia, Accurist, etc. (over 100 Models). 3, Diamond and Gem Rings and all Jewellery. 4, Binoculars by all Famous makers. Magnifications 6 x 30 7 x 50, 8 x 30, 12 x 40, 20 x 40 etc. 6, Toys and Xmas Goods

J. A. DAVIS & CO. (Dept. T.B.N. 9), 94-104, Denmark Hill, London, S.E.5

THE DISSENTIZENS

BY

BRUNO G. CONDRAY

Author of

"ODYSSEY IN SPACE", "THE OUTER BEYOND".

THERE was an element of chance in landing on an uncharted planetoid. It meant escape to freedom if the conditions were favourable. If not, then it was certain death. A death which could be slow and torturous, or quick if unexpected danger leapt from the bowels of the unknown.

Zana Dench assayed these thoughts as he gazed through precision lenses at the small, univiting disc moving lazily beneath his crippled ship. The *Starchaser* was in a bad way, three of her jets knocked out, a huge dent in the starboard side, and the possibility of the air-insulation skin bursting at any moment. He turned to his co-pilot. "Looks as if this is our new home, Red," he said, jerking a finger at the screen reproducing the vision below.

Red Anzoin grunted, stretched his huge frame and grinned uncertainly. "That's if we can put the ship down in one piece."

"That's quite a point," conceded Zana, glancing round at the multiplicity of instruments and dials in the pilot's cabin. "The *Starchaser* was named hopefully, but she's out of date, certainly not fitted for the mission we've set her on. Still, beggars can't be choosers. We got away from Terra, and that was our main object."

Red raked his hand through a mop of unruly ginger hair. "Guess you're right," he said. "But that won't be much good if we pulverise ourselves putting her down."

Zana shrugged his broad shoulders. His lean jaw jutted and his dark blue eyes narrowed. "I've not much hope of saving

the ship, but we're only nine strong. I don't want any casualties —every life is going to be needed in the struggle to establish ourselves. We've shaken the dirt of the Earth Control Board off our boots, but if there is a better life up here and you want to enjoy it, you'd better go into the crew cabin and line up the landing dope with Flash and Ashby. This landing is going to be tricky. I've some computing to do myself."

The electric mechanism whirred and Red swung through the bulkhead door. Zana was left to compute in silence, which was the way he liked it. In his own mind he wasn't too happy about the crew's chances of survival. Things were a lot worse than they knew. He also realised that as leader of the Dissentizen movement they looked to him to deliver them into a Utopia in space. A tall order for an antiquated ship with nearly half its power knocked out.

He finished spinning the dial of the speed-curve computer and received its final reckoning with a pursed-lip sigh. Out among the blackness of space the flickerless stars shone with transcendental brightness. The sun stood out bold and splendid; a fiery parent body with her planet children arranged around her. Zana heaved another ponderous sigh. He had hoped to take the *Starchaser* beyond the solar system, but the old ship had its limitations, and they had become patent as he had knocked the guts out of her in his desire to get away. That had been his first mistake, the first of many perhaps?

The escape from Earth had come off, however, and now they had to make the best of it. An uncharted planetoid looked a good thing in many ways. They could start a settlement, and with reasonable luck they could be assured of being left alone. The E.C.B. wasn't likely to pursue them. Knowing what ship they had taken, they had probably written off the *Starchaser* as an incandescent blob floating about in eternity. Anyway, there were countless charted and uncharted planetoids of varying sizes. It would take centuries to explore them all.

The other planets were not likely to bother them either, for their movements were again controlled by the all-powerful E.C.B. Earthmen had reached beyond their planet, but in discovering and exploiting other worlds they had taken their restrictions and regimentation with them. The Martian Control Board was answerable to the E.C.B. Venus, too, came under the same system. Jupiter was yet another of the puppet states jerked by the strings of the E.C.B. The whole planetary system was guarded over by the grey uniformed Security Corps. The people were watched, spied upon, controlled, kicked, guided, directed, checked, numbered, or put into a disintegration chamber if it suited the E.C.B. And any form of opposition didn't suit the lords of power. They believed in absolute control of food, work, homes, families, politics—everything.

All this was the result of Man's conquest of space. The initial efforts had been made in the cause of expansion and freedom. But early on it had been seen that freedom in space could be dangerous. Any group who could build and equip a space ship was a potential enemy. They could rove in space or settle on a planetoid; either way they were capable of causing trouble by launching long-range projectiles on established bases. Man had conquered space, but in doing so had added to the fetters around his legs. The only way to prevent disaster was by absolute control of Man himself. And so the citizens of Earth were gradually subjugated, scientists working hand in glove with the politicians to produce the citizen, who by devious methods, could be controlled into doing as he was told.

Those who conformed to all the required standards and had a clean bill of obedience received a certificate and registration number. This entitled them to be governed by the Control Board from the time they awoke until they went to bed; it was doubtful if they could escape the E.C.B. even in their dreams.

Zana glanced through the observation panel. Stars, stars and more stars; vast spaces between them, deceptively suggesting freedom. He had fought against the rule of Earth regimentation to obtain this freedom, but had been declared an outlaw, officially dubbed as a Dissentizen and driven underground.

The Dissentizen movement had been small, membership fraught with danger. Of the 1,500 members only ten remained after the final purge of the Security Corps. Zana fidgeted on his sprung seat, fingered the switches of the dead jets, flicked them over in the vain hope of fusing power into them. They clicked ominously. After the purge and the mass slaughter he had planned the escape. He had once held a first-grade space-pilot's ticket, but when classified as a Dissentizen suspect, his ticket was withdrawn. With forged papers and a facial mask modelled by Judd Carfa he had managed to get on the maintenance staff on a space port. Here he had sorted out the disused *Starchaser* with the aid of Ashby, Red and Flash Cartwright. They had secretly fitted the old ship with government equipment and instruments. They had gambled with death by disintegration at every move, but the dice had rolled their way. At least, right until zero hour.

The ten strong Dissentizen movement was made up of eight men and two women. An unbalanced ratio of sexes with which to start a new community, but with each firmly believing in their cause, they had been ready to take the chance. Then sixty minutes before the time planned for take-off, news came through of Varmi's arrest. That meant that they had to travel with eight men and one woman, Alora. It also meant that there wasn't a minute to lose. The Security Corps had electronic torture devices to force words from the most obstinate tongue.

In a blaze of radio-active fire they touched off. Disaster had followed disaster—trouble with the power distribution, a complete seize-up of a stabilising jet, then a collision with a meteorite speck which had damaged the outer skin. The dice had started to roll the wrong way and Zana was worried.

"Hallo, skipper." The voice crackled over the inter-comm.

"Yes, what is it?" snapped Zana.

"This is Judd. You've got to put her down quick. The damaged outside structure is splintering. We've reinforced the inside to maintain the airlock, but it may not last long."

Zana passed an agitated hand across his brow. "Right, Judd! I'm coming in to put you wise. We can't risk this touchdown without taking every possible precaution. I need more data before I attempt a landing."

"You're the skipper," said Judd. "I don't suppose you want to sizzle up any more than the rest of us."

"Send Red in to take over. The automtic control is out of action."

Red came through the door and Zana gave him terse orders, then went into the main crew cabin.

"Where's Billy and Alora?"

A thin-faced youngster with a high brow and protruding eyes answered. "Down in the power cabin saying their prayers."

"And keeping the heat-box pressures up, I hope," grinned Zana. "Well, what do you make of it, Flash?"

The youngster stuck out his jaw and scratched his head. "We're on the course we plotted, but something's wrong." He poked a finger at the scanner screen. "The disc isn't charted, but according to the gravitational detectors it has a heavier mass-size ratio than most of the charted planetoids."

"It looks as if it's going to be our home, so you'd better get the exact position recorded on the astrochart. Take theodolite shots on Mars and Venus, then plot in the co-ordinates given by the calculator. You never know when such data might come in handy."

"Right," said Flash, moving to commence the task.

Zana caught hold of his arm and drew him back towards the screen. "What about the disc itself? Can we live on it? Is there air, food, water? We can't spend the rest of our lives in space suits."

Flash grinned. "Relax, skipper," he advised. "So far I haven't worked out the correct course to steer."

Zana realised that he was being over-anxious and the youngster was right to remind him of it. But youthful enthusiasm sometimes overstepped the line of reasonable precaution. "O.K.," he acknowledged. "Before you start plotting though, let me

know if the planetoid is in telescopic view of any of the populated planets."

"I doubt it, but I'll check as far as I can."

"You'd better get working on it right away." Zana's rap of authority disguised the feeling of apprehension stabbing at his innards. "As soon as you get the course to steer, put it through to me." He spun round to Ashby, who had been listening with avid interest. "Keep the radio dead. I don't want anything picked up."

He turned to the other two members of the crew. "Boorman, you help Flash with the electronic computers. Aloysius, if your God is in heaven, you'd better offer up a prayer for us, then standby your observation panel and make sure everything is recorded. I'll send Red in to help, and he can be prepared to mount the blaster, just in case we run into trouble. For all we know the planetoid might be populated."

The swarthy features of ex-priest Aloysius creased with incredulity, then he said, "But not with an E.C.B. agent, we hope."

Zana gave a playful push at his dark head. "Stranger things have happened in space," he said, then returned to his cabin.

Flash soon gave him the required course and Zana flicked the necessary switches on his control panel until he got the cross hairs of the compass lined up. He spoke to the power cabin over intercomm. "How's the heat box temperature?" he asked.

Alora answered in a husky voice. "150 degrees short of maximum."

"Is that the most you can get?"

"The absolute limit."

"Right. Well, keep her there, and watch the pumps." He flicked over more switches and the ship clattered with vibration. He worked out the power ratio of each of the remaining jets in turn, calculating to the last degree the amount of thrust he could rely upon. The drag on the ship was greatly increased by the lateral tilt and in normal flight she continually skidded to starboard, all of which would have to be balanced by the controls and the tail jet to make a safe landing.

The *Starchaser's* progress was becoming increasingly laboured as she moved into the gravitation belt of the planetoid. The zone was thicker than Flash had calculated and the curve of approach had to be steepened. Zana's hands flicked over the controls as his eyes raked the banks of instruments with frenzied glances. Through the observation panel he watched the planetoid grow in size, diffusing an unnatural grey-blue colour. Then, like the sand of an earth desert, a thin haze of impenetrable dust seemed to rise up from the bowels of space and mingle grey with the blackness.

"Space dust!" he yelled into the intercomm. "Get the repulsion circuit on and try to clear it."

Boorman sat in shirt sleeves, tiny beads of sweat trickling down his fat cheeks. "It's on," he shouted. "But having no effect."

Red cut in. "Zana, the dust is radio-active. Ship's temperature is rising dangerously. We've got to get clear of this stuff."

"We can't," Zana cut back. "I daren't risk bursting out of the zone and coming in again. The skin fracture won't stand it."

The crew cabin was ominously silent. Zana gritted his teeth as the sweat began to exude from his body. He had seen space dust before, when he spent an apprentice year manning an observation satellite. The dust was often patchy, almost like sea fog. The only hope now was to get through it.

Aloysius cried out in urgency. "The radar screen is pitted with tiny masses. We're going into a galaxy of fragments. Some of them quite large."

Zana burst more power into the ship shouting, "Get down on your couches. We've got to burst through this or bust."

The shudder of subsonic sound rang through the *Starchaser* like an amplified peal of cracked bells.

Billy Brown's voice squeaked from the power cabin. "We've been hit again, Skipper."

Zana's face was white and oozing sweat. He had heard the fragments of coagulated space dust peppering the outer skin, but the last resounding bang had almost knocked his heart out of place. "Power all right?" he queried.

"So far."

"Skin holding, Judd?"

"You'll soon know when it doesn't," came the grim reply.

"Dust clearing," yelled Red, his eyes red-rimmed with gazing through the viewer eyepieces. "Push on, Skipper. It's now or never."

Zana drew his shirt sleeve across his brow. "How right you are," he muttered, almost to himself. He twanged at the switches, squeezing out every ounce of power the pile could yield. The ship pitched and yawed and skidded as she went through the belt Aloysius had seen on the radar screen. Alien gravitational masses pulled at her, vying with each other like a lot of spiders to pull her into the maw of their vicious webs.

Red's words rang through Zana's ears. Now or never . . . now or never . . .

His fair hair matted across his brow, his body was arched with tension as it pressed back against the yielding couch springs. With a final thrust and a caterwaul of noise they came out into

the pure Immaculate black of abysmal space. The planetoid stood out larger and blue, almost as if illumined by an inner light.

Flash gave him the data to feed into the calculators. Zana got his approach curve. "Standby for landing," he warned. "Red, stand by the atmospheric brake control."

Red acknowledged. He was the only other fully experienced spaceman on the crew, which was a strain on his nerves, for he was keenly aware of the risk in landing a crippled ship.

"Stap down," said Zana. "This is it, friends."

The ship jolted forward. Zana strained every nerve, but the movement of his hands was cool and decisive. The *Starchaser* shuddered, hung in space, then plummeted downwards, fire leaping from her exhausts. She keeled over to starboard. Zana plied every trick of manœuvrability he had ever learned. Still she swung laterally. With one braking jet inoperative the speed downward seemed suicidal. The planetoid rushed at them in a swirl of blue. Zana nursed the switches. When it looked as if they must bury themselves tail first in the planetoid's surface, Red flung over the atmospheric brake control. The whole ship trembled its objection, hung indecisively, stalled, then dropped to the ground. One of the hydraulic landing struts dug in, the other went at an angle and folded up like match wood. The ship balanced precariously, then came smashing down on her nose. In a hazy, semi-conscious state Zana waited for the explosion which would end everything. He could hardly believe his luck when it didn't come.

Zana's head cleared and the full weight of his responsibilities stirred him to action. He reached for the intercomm. "All hands acknowledge back," he said. He repeated it, slower and with less panic.

Billy Brown and Alora answered promptly. Then the others came in, one by one, reporting freedom from injury.

Judd Carfa came in last. "I'm all right," he said, in his clipped high-pitched voice. "But not the ship. She's leaking. To what extent I don't know yet."

"Here that?" snapped Zana. "Get into your space-suits before you do anything else. Boorman, check the primary circuits, see what equipment is still working."

Zana stood up and stretched, surveying his cabin and the various bits of apparatus which had been dislodged. Considering the jolt the ship had suffered, it was nothing short of a miracle that the interior was still in good order. This, however, was no indication of what they would find outside, and since the ship was leaking, the best thing was to go out and make a thorough examination.

"All space-suits on?" he asked.

The crew answered back.

"Airlock mechanism operating, Boorman?"

"It is."

"What about the atmosphere, Judd?"

"The ship's leaking fast. We'll have to go out and take our chances."

Zana snapped the last catch of his space-helmet into position and spoke into his internal radio. "Right, we'll do just that. All make for the main airlock door."

The outer door swung open and the crew strained forward eagerly for a glimpse at their new homeland. The nose of the ship was buried about ten feet into soft alluvial sand, the rest of the long body poked upwards at an angle of 80 degrees. One glance was sufficient to see that the *Starchaser* would never launch into space again. The damage to the outside structure was such that only a fully-equipped maintance unit could patch up.

"Well, this is definitely home," said Zana. "There's no chance of retreat now."

The rest of them followed his gaze over the shattered lines of the ship. A heavy, pregnant silence hung over them.

Flash Cartwright, the youngest member, broke the silence and softened lumps in the throat with a boyish laugh. "Let's get out and have a look at it," he said practically.

His enthusiasm jerked the others back to the reality where the past was of no avail. From now on they must all look to the future. The telescopic legs of the ladder were two feet from the ground when they reached the end of their travel. Zana jumped down first. The others followed, gazing eagerly around.

The bluish undergrowth was the outstanding feature of the pock-marked plateau on which they had landed. Away to the north a range if whitish hills rose in a series of jagged-toothed peaks. Westwards lay what looked like a dense forest of unusually tall trees witb the same bluish foliage as the undergrowth. In any other direction, as far as the eye could see, stretched the ragged undulations of desert-like plateau. There was no sign of life. No wind. A wide open vista of eery silence.

The crew grouped together, looking to Zana for guidance.

"What do we do now?" asked Judd. He was a doctor and had been keeping his eye on the crew for any ill-effects.

"Better make atmospheric tests. Boorman, get the apparatus out of the ship."

Boorman's fat body waddled off in obedience.

"Our space-suit cylinders will last for twelve hours," said Zana. "We've got enough spares for three extra ones each."

"That gives us forty-eight hours to live if we can't breathe

in this atmosphere," put in Judd. His voice was cold and matter of fact.

Zana nodded. "Not much use making extensive preparations if the air doesn't suit us."

There was an anxious shifting of heavy booted feet. Red moved away to help Boorman.

"No hope of sealing the skin of the ship, Billy?" queried Zana.

"Not a chance."

Air became the vital issue. All efforts turned to making the all-important test. The group gathered round the grey-boxed apparatus Boorman brought out of the ship. Zana and Judd bent on their knees, peering at the dials through the facepieces of their space-helmets. Aloysius made the Sign of the Cross over the box. Zana adjusted the controls of the mechanism. All eyes followed the flicker of the dial needles. Pressure. Density. Content. The needles seemed to flutter in panic. The mechanism suddenly inflated a large balloon attached to a test nozzle. The balloon skin was grey in colour at first.

Behind space-helmets eyes fixed on the balloon and protruded with anxiety. The colour slowly changed to purple.

"Ammonia," breathed Judd.

Lines of red began streaking the purple skin.

"Methane."

"Hell, I can't stand it," muttered Ashby.

Flash moved behind him and whispered, "Steady!"

The balloon mottled as yellow began creeping into it.

"Sulphur."

They all hung on the doctor's words.

The mottling fused into brilliant amber. "Oxygen," declared Judd. His usually cold voice was tinged with excitement.

Alora bent over the balloon and fondled it with her gloved hands. Over her radio she said, "If my lips were free I'd kiss it."

"Save your kisses, there might be enough clamouring for them later on," snapped Judd.

Zana chipped in. "What's the verdict, Doc?"

"You've heard the contents I mentioned. But oxygen predominates."

"How do we go on then? Can we breathe the stuff without suits."

"I don't know. We'll have to find out by trial."

"One of us take our head-piece off, you mean?"

"That's the only way."

"I'll do it," said Billy Brown.

They all turned to him. Billy Brown was something of ao

enigma. On Earth he had been chosen as the ideal True Citizen. Feted in every part of the world for his model obedience, Industry and loyalty, the E.C.B. had revived an old catch-name and dubbed him Billy Brown of London Town. All this had been too much for an ordinary citizen and Billy had renounced his exemplary conduct to become a Dissentizen. He had studied space-ship power installations under Zana's tuition and had become a passable engineer.

"There's no hurry," said Zana. "We've got forty-eight hours before we're dependent on this atmosphere."

"No time like the present," said Billy.

"He's right," Judd agreed. "The sooner we know the better."

"I realise that, but——"

"It's best for all of us," said Billy, walking over and putting his hand on Zana's shoulder.

"O.K., it's your——" He broke off abruptly.

"It will be all our funerals if I don't survive," Billy reminded him.

"But we're not going to think that way." Zana forced some enthusiasm into his voice. "Start undoing your helmet clamps."

Billy obeyed.

"Judd, you'd better keep with him. Go round the other side of the ship. It might not be pleasant to witness."

"I've got no objections, if you haven't," said Billy.

"You'd better keep out of sight," snapped Zana. "Make sure you have your radio on."

Billy went with Judd behind the leaning tower of the crippled ship. The others squatted down in the blue undergrowth.

"Don't take your helment right off," said Zana, directing Billy by radio. "Lift it up, take one breath, then snap your helment down."

Zana's heart thumped during the ensuing seconds of silence.

"Right, done it!" yelled Billy.

"How do you feel?"

"Hollow inside."

"Any effect on your nose or throat?"

"No."

"Any irritation of the skin?"

"No."

"Try again. Keep the helmet up longer this time. Are you watching him, Judd?"

"He seems perfectly normal."

"Right, go ahead."

"All right so far," Judd told those hunched together

anxiously. "He's been exposed for twenty seconds."

"That's enough."

The waiting was a torture. Zana had to break the silence. "How do you feel, Billy?"

"Fine."

"Ready for another go."

"Whenever you say."

"All right, take your helmet off."

Those waiting were soon treated to the spectacle of Billy Brown dancing round to them with his fair hair neatly in place, his cheeks puffed rosily and a broad grin on his cheerful face. The radios hummed with relieved sighs.

"You can keep it off for an hour," said Zana. "We'll see if that has any effect on you. If not, we'll all start acclimatising ourselves to it gradually. Anyway, it seems safe enough for us to start settling in. We'll get the tents out of the ship, make camp, eat and rest. After that we'll start looking around."

They all got up, their movements excited and flurried. Zana began giving orders for the erection of a temporary home.

Having established that human life was possible on the planetoid, Zana set about the planning of the new community. He had been willing to relinquish his leadership now that they were of necessity confined to land, but the others had unanimously elected him to continue in command. There were problems, however, set apart from the actual conditions. The chief difficulty being the ratio of the sexes. In the future Zana foresaw trouble on this point. After mulling the question over in his mind, he decided that the only way to circumvent it was to have a definite understanding from the outset.

Three tents had been erected on the plateau close to the ship, the presence of which was their only reminder of the planet they had forsaken. Zana and Red shared one of the smaller tents, Alora had the other, and the other six had the large communal tent. They had found water in the shape of a stream coming down from the hills, and there were edible fish in it. There were also various forms of bird life and the forest trees yielded a tufty purple nut containing sweet milky fluid. Although they had not explored the planetoid other than their immediate vicinity, it seemed that they were adequately provided with the necessities of life.

Bearing all this in mind, Zana waited for Alora to answer his call to his tent. She appeared at the flap with the light of the sun glowing behind her. A rich cascade of black hair hung down her back. She wore a yellow smock-tunic which hung loosely on her tall, graceful body. Her eyes were brilliantly dark, her

lips a little too thick. But she was eminently a woman.

"Sit down," invited Zana, indicating a folding chair beside the rough table he had rigged up.

She sat with long-limbed grace. There was a certain sleekness about her movements of which she was not unconscious. But Zana had to face reality. "I'm calling a general council," he said. "Before doing so, I thought it best to speak with you alone. You realise your position, of course?"

She raised up a little and smiled. "It is better than we hoped for at first."

His thick brows merged over the bridge of his nose. "Your personal position," he emphasized.

"Oh!" A frown settled on her wide-browed face and accentuated the high cheek bones.

"I can see you've thought about it," he said. "You're the only woman among us. Sooner or later there's going to be——"

"Shall we leave it until the situation arises?" she broke in hurriedly.

"I think not. A clear understanding from the start is the safest footing."

"Well?" There was a distant nervousness in her voice.

"Our way of escape is cut off unless we use the radio to give our position. I take it, however, that our aim is to settle here and live our lives in freedom. Using the radio would only result in our being taken off to a penal colony at the best, but most likely to a disintegration chamber."

Alora looked puzzled.

"The point is, is this community going to live and die with us? The answer to that is in your hands, Alora. I want it settled without trouble among the men."

She stood up and faced his searching gaze. "You can settle many things, Zana," she said slowly. "But human nature must take its course. The future is in my hands. All right, leave it there. I promise you I'll do nothing to undermine your leadership. My life, however, must be my own. I came here to be free."

Zana shrugged his shoulders. "Fair enough," he said. "You must make one promise, nevertheless."

"Well?"

"That if you have any doubts you bring them to me. I'm not too happy about Judd. That remark of his about clamouring for your kisses has set me thinking. Watch him, and if there's any trouble come straight to me. Is that a deal?"

She smiled her frown away and put out her hand. "A deal," she said, and they shook on it.

With a log encampment built from the trees of the forest,

and the community running along a happy-go-lucky routine, Zana decided that the time had come to explore the possibilities of the planetoid. He set out with Judd Carfa to trace the source of the stream. They were both armed and prepared to camp out. The blue undergrowth had long clinging tendrils and the going was hard. They followed the stream to the hills, then began to climb crumbling white rock. The hills were quite barren, and the only form of life they encountered were small flocks of large white birds with massive wingspans.

"Shall we down a few of them?" asked Judd.

"We'll do it on the way back," said Zana, going on in spite of the fact that his companion had stopped.

Judd hurriedly caught up. "Do you intend going on far?"

"To the top of the main rise to see if we can get a view over the other side."

"You'll find the distance deceptive. I don't think we ought to be away too long on the first occasion."

Zana turned on him sharply. "Why not?"

Judd was surprised by the vehemence of the retort. Behind his thick-lensed spectacles his eyes blinked owlishly. His protruding teeth were prominent in his answering grin. "I'm a little afraid of Alora."

Anger blazed from Zana's blue eyes, his chin jutted determinedly. This was something to be settled here and now. "What's on your mind, Judd?" he snapped.

"Oh, nothing! But she's alone with six men. You never know what——"

Zana grabbed him by the front of his tunic. "And when we're back there, she's alone with eight of us. If there's going to be trouble over her, I reckon it will be you who'll start it. That's why you're with me now."

Fear and indignation mottled Judd's twisted features. "You've got no right to say that," he protested.

"Listen, Alora can look after herself. She's going to do just that, do you understand? There'll no interference from you, me, or any one of the others. I'm not having this community split because of Alora. I'll take drastic action if you make it necessary. Now come on, we'd better start moving."

They trudged on in silence. Judd's brow black with wrinkled thought. The peak proved disturbingly elusive. Each rise they topped seemed to bring them no nearer.

"We'll never make it this trip," said Judd, sitting on a jagged piece of pumice rock. He mopped his brow with his sleeve.

Zana glanced at him, realising that his temper had forced him into a faster pace than was sensible. Judd was all in, the corners of his mouth drooping, his body bent with exhaustion.

"Right, we'll rest for a while."

"Then go back?" asked Judd hopefully.

"I reckon so. According to my calculations there's only four Earth days of light left. It will probably take us that to reach the peak. We don't want to get trapped up here in the dark."

Relief flooded over Judd's face. "That's very sensible," he said. "The others will get worried if we're away too long. They might panic, especially Ashby."

Zana squatted down and stretched his legs. "What's wrong with Ashby?" he asked, without much enthusiasm.

"He's not settled here. He told me that he'd radio Terra if things got too bad."

"What?" Zana was on his feet in an instant. "Why didn't you tell me this before? You knew Ashby was in charge of the radio."

"I didn't think we'd be away so long. Anyway, you'd have only thought it an excuse to get back."

"Well, we're going back. Straight away," flashed Zana, eyeing him sternly. "If you can't keep up with me you'll have to make your own way. Neither you nor Ashby are going to upset our plans, not if I can help it."

When Zana arrived back at the camp he found Red in a state of frenzy. "Thank heavens, you're back, Zana," he said, rushing out to meet him as the solitary figure strode across the plateau. "Where's Judd?"

"He's coming up behind. What's been happening?"

"It's only thirty-six hours since you left, but the whole complexion of this place has changed." He was wide-eyed with concern.

Zana knew that it took a lot to upset Red. "Come on, give," he said. "What's gone wrong?"

"Everything," snapped Red.

Billy Brown hailed them as they came into the camp area. "All right?" shouted Red.

Billy gave him the thumbs up.

"How's Ashby?"

"Ashby?" whispered Zana, with a tweak of apprehension.

"Still under," yelled Billy.

"Right, keep watch over him."

Zana grabbed Red's arm urgently. "What's wrong with Ashby?" he demanded.

"He went berserk. I had to give him a shot in the arm to put him out."

"Did he get to the radio?" Zana's lips were quivering.

"No; he was setting up the apparatus when I discovered him.

Let's get into the hut and I'll tell you everything."

Zana curbed his avid desire for the details, but not for long. As soon as they were settled in the hut he said, "Now Red. What's been going on?"

Red leaned back on a crude wooden chair and sighed. "Boorman started it," he began. "During his watch on the scanner he came rushing out of the ship yelling that he'd seen two men."

"It was Judd and I," snapped Zana impatiently.

"No," Red contradicted. "You went North to the hills. Boorman reckons he followed your progress for several hours, then when he swung the viewer to the West, he saw two figures on the fringe of the forest."

"He was seeing things."

"Not according to him."

"Get him in. I'll quiz him."

Red went to the door and bellowed.

"Go on," said Zana.

"I went to the scanner with him, but couldn't see a thing. I told him it was all the purponut he'd been eating. Must have gone to his head."

Boorman struck his tousled head in the doorway. "Saw you come, Zana," he said, almost apologetically. "Guessed you'd want to see me." His face was sickly white, his eyes fixed and staring. He looked as if he'd seen a ghost.

"Come in and sit down," said Zana. "Take it easy and tell me what you saw."

"I know you won't believe me, but I saw them on the scanner screen. I saw them, I tell you. Two of them there were, peering at us through binoculars."

Zana's face was grim. "What were they like?"

"Little creatures. Both of them too small to be you, or Judd, for that matter. I saw them, Zana, honest I did."

"Did you see their faces?"

"No, they were covered by the glasses."

"What were they dressed in?"

"Slouch trousers and tunics."

"What colour?"

"Red."

"You're sure?"

"Certain."

"You can't shake him on it," put in Red.

A thick crease wrinkled Zana's brow. "How long did you have them in view?"

"They scampered back into the forest as soon as I got the

scanner lenses on them. I didn't have time to intensify the picture."

"What do you make of it, Zana?" asked Red anxiously.

"Sounds as if he saw something."

"I did, Zana. I tell you, I did."

"Right, but you should have kept your mouth shut until you told Red. Is this what sent Ashby off the beam?"

"Partly, but that's not all," said Red. "We were still babbling over the prospects of their being other creatures on the planetoid when an unholy roar came from out of the forest. Hell, Zana, it was terrific. It sent the iciest shivers I've ever had right through my spine. We all gaped at each other, then when we thought our ears must be deceiving us, the roar erupted from the forest again."

"You all heard it?"

"Every one of us. Alora panicked. I gave her some mending to do and kept near her hut."

"What about Ashby?"

"He seemed the least put out at first. He didn't say a word, just slipped away. We were too busy speculating to worry about him. When soon after we broke up, Billy came and told me Ashby was tuning the radio. He fought like a wild cat when I went to stop him. It took three of them all their time to hold him while I put the shot in his arm."

"Did he say what he was going to do?"

"I'll say he did. He roared to the extremities of space that he was going to signal the E.C.B."

"The devil he was!" muttered Zana grimly. "Whatever has turned up, we can't risk that happening again. Get Flash to remove the main valves from the set. I'll take personal care of them. I'm not going back to take an E.C.B. death sentence. What about you?"

"I'll stick it out with you, Zaoa," declared Red, without hesitation.

Boorman was not quite so ready with his answer.

"Well?" queried Zana. "Do you want to sizzle up, or are you going to take your chance against your red-suited midgets?"

Boorman grinned nervously. "I wish there was a third choice," he said.

"Well, there isn't," snapped Zana, in no mood for jokes. "What about this roaring. Did you get any line on it?"

"No, but we saw smoke coming up from the forest."

"Smoke? Are you sure it wasn't space dust?"

"Certain," Red assured him.

Zana got up and began pacing restlessly. "Midget creatures, smoke, Ashby off his rocker. Hell, I don't know what to make of it! I thought we'd had things too easy for us."

"What are you going to do?" asked Boorman.

"Cut off the line to the E.C.B. Red, you'd better get those valves out of the set yourself."

At that moment Judd Carfa came rushing in wild with excitement. "Billy told me what happened," he gasped. "We've got get away from this place before it's too late."

"Red, get that job done," said Zana. Turning to Judd he went on, "Now, what's on your mind?"

"Plenty. Look at this." He pulled a piece of dull white ore from his pocket. His eyes were alight with triumph as he watched Zana examine it. Unable to wait for comment he said, "Do you recognise it?"

"No."

"It's pure white pluronium," Judd announced, with an expansive flourish of his hairy hands. "Our pardon, and our ticket to Terra."

Zana cut him short. "What are you raving about? How do you know this is pluronium, anyway?"

"I've tested it with Billy."

"Where did you find it?"

"In the hills soon after you left me. I took a rest and spotted a vein of it. There's huge deposits of it in the hills."

Zana squared up to him. "And it will stay there."

Judd ogled behind his spectacles, his jaw drooped. "What do you mean?" he gasped. "You know it's value to apace-travellers. The E.C.B. have scoured the whole system for fresh sources of supply."

"Maybe, but this is one source they're going to be denied."

"You're crazy. With a secret like this in our possession we could dictate our own terms."

"It's you that's crazy, Judd," said Zana, sinking down on his bunk. "And you have a remarkably short memory. How do you propose informing the E.C.B. of your find?"

"By radio, of course," said Judd eagerly. "We could do that and state that we wouldn't give our position away unless our freedom was guaranteed."

"You fool," snapped Zana contemptuously. "Don't you know that they could trace our position the moment we broke radio silence?"

Judd's mouth gaped open. "I hadn't thought of that," he murmured.

"They'd send. n enough ships to wipe us out, then set up a space-port and have cargo ships taking away as much of the ore as a penal colony could mine. We wouldn't even qualify to swell the numbers of the penal colony."

"Zana's right," muttered Boorman. "A pity, Judd. You were beginning to raise my hopes."

Judd dug his hands into his sides in agitation. "There must be some way of using this pluronium to our advantage," he wailed.

"Perhaps there will be if the worse comes to the worse," said Zana, leaping to his feet. "We may yet need something as a tool of negotiation with the E.C.B. But we're only contacting Terra as a last resource. Red is out dismantling the radio, from now on it stays that way."

Judd started to object, but Zana's menacing bulk standing over him made him swallow his objection. He had the sense to realise that the fierce blue eyes fixed on him were capable of drastic action.

"You'd both better get back to your hut," fired Zana. "I want to talk things over with Red. After that I'll call a general council."

Judd went off mumbling to himself. Zana stuck his hands in his pockets and closed his eyes—it was the only way to prevent himself being violent with Judd. There was trouble anough without splitting their own ranks. Men reacted to danger in different ways. On Earth he had known Judd to act wisely and bravely, but out here in space he was being small-minded and craven. Exile didn't suit him, but he'd have to stick it like the rest of them. Zana's lips clamped together with determination. Judd was a menace who must not be allowed to influence the others.

Red came back with the dismantled valves. "I've just heard Judd's news from Billy. Fancy this place being loaded with pluronium."

"Forget it," snapped Zana. "It can't do us any good."

"Guess not," agreed Red, setting the radio equipment delicately on the table. "But it might set the E.C.B. on our tail sooner than we expected."

"I doubt it. Even the most sensitive detectors would have a job pin-pointing this ore mass from a coasting ship. Remember that asteroid belt we came through? It would send the detector needles dizzy. Anyway, we're thousands of miles off any of the recognised space-routes."

Red pouted his lips ruminatively. "Let's hope you're right, he said. "We've got enough to deal with. I've just left Ashby. I reckon all this has sent him over the mental border. I had to strap him to his bed. He was getting violent, even though the effects of the drug hadn't worn off. I left Aloysius with him, then told Judd to look him over."

Zana groaned. "Just when we're going to need all our man-power. We've got to go into the forest and investigate."

Red nodded. "The roaring, the midgets and the fire—it can't all be make believe."

As if to provide confirmation a fierce, deep shattering roar seemed to tremble the log hut.

"Suffering hell, what was that?" flashed Zana, leaping to the door.

"That's the roaring," said Red, somewhat unnecessarily. "It sounds even closer than before." He joined Red at the door. "Look, there's the smoke coming from above the forest. Can you see it?"

Zana nodded grimly, his eyes staring in fixed concentration. The others had also rushed out of their huts. All except Ashby were following the line of Red's pointing finger.

Alora saw Zana and came rushing across to him. "What is it?" she cried.

"Take it easy," he said, without looking away. "I'm going to find out what it is."

She clung to his arm. "Zana, be careful," she warned him.

He grinned and patted the back of her hand, but cut off abruptly as he caught Judd slyly glancing at them. "You'd better stay here with Red," he said. He stepped outside and called to the men standing within the small stockade they had built.

"What are you going to do?" asked Judd. His voice was high-pitched with sensation.

"There's some connection between those roars and the fire. We're going into the forest to find out what."

"Zana, I can't make it. I'm——"

"Nobody has asked you, Judd," Zana interrupted. "All you've got to do is hand your gun over to Billy. Red, give Aloysius and Flash a blaster."

"I prefer to keep my weapon," said Judd. There was a sneer on his cruel lips and his hand crept towards the knobbly butt protruding from the holster.

Zana moved in a flash, covering the ground to Judd and withdrawing his own blaster all in the same movement. "Don't get on the wrong side of me at the moment, Judd," he warned. With his free hand he jerked the gun from Judd's holster and tossed it to Billy.

"We've a right to have a weapon to defend ourselves with," objected Judd. His face was red and blotchy with fury.

In a glance which covered them all Zana said, "You'll take orders from Red while I'm away. If he thinks you need weapons he'll issue them, not unless."

There was a momentary silence.

"Flash. Aloysius. Billy. Get yourselves ready, we're leaving at once. Judd, you look after Ashby. Let your professional

duties occupy your mind for a while. Now get going, all of you. Alora, you stay with Red. Give him any assistance he needs."

Judd spun round from his retreat. Hatred blazed through his thick lenses. "Ashby needs a nurse," he said.

"Right," snapped Zana. "You can be doctor and nurse." He turned to Red as Judd hurried away. "Watch him, Red. He's in a dangerous mood. Make sure you secure those valves."

The four men set out from the camp and headed for the forest. The smoke seemed to have died down, but roars and deep-throated moans still reverberated through the tall, unwavering trees. The investigators spread out, Zana keeping up a fast pace with Flash in front, the other two scurrying along behind. When they reached the forest edge, Zana brought them together. They peered into the tenebrous denseness of the trees, silent, fearful of something alien.

"We'll keep close together from now on," said Zana. "If one of you breaks away it could be fatal. There's miles of this forest and heaven knows what's in it. Get your blasters out, but keep your trigger fingers steady. Don't shoot without my command, unless you're in personal danger. Is that clear?"

They nodded and advanced forward, guns at the ready. Their progress was impeded by the clinging tendrils of the thickening undergrowth. It was hot and clammy, so that they each in turn took off clothes until they were reduced to shirts and tattered trousers. Silence settled over them and the forest. As they penetrated further it became darker. They moved along in Indian file through the closely-spaced trees, keeping in touching distance of each other.

"I can smell the smoke," said Billy, at last. His fat face was running with sweat, a jagged scratch down his right cheek trickled blood into the collar of his yellow shirt.

They stopped and sniffed the air. "You're right," said Zana.

"Come on," urged Flash eagerly. "We're getting nearer."

Before they had gone far they were instinctively halted by a shattering crash and a trumpeting bellow. Terror zig-zagged through Zana's body. He had to try twice before he could speak. He felt Flash's trembling hand on his arm. "Steady," he whispered.

The ground beneath them shook as they heard something pound through the trees.

"It's an animal of some kind," whispered Aloysius. "It must be of colossal size." He hurriedly crossed his breast and drew back into the huddle around the tree trunk.

"Still," said Zana. "It's stopped."

Suddenly he felt Billy Brown's hand clawing at his arm, it

found a grip and squeezed like the jaws of a clamp. "There it is," breathed Billy, his voice barely audible. "To the right."

They moved round the tree into view and gasped. Flash raised his blaster.

"Don't shoot yet," said Zana.

The raised arm fell limp to Flash's side. His eyes were wide and incredulous. In fact, four pairs of eyes boggled at forest creature in fearful wonderment. It stood almost as high as the trees, at least seventy feet high, with a huge long-snouted face. It was grey-green in colour, long necked and had a crested back. The two front legs were of tremendous length and power, while the rear legs were shorter and thicker. A fearsome creature in every aspect it squatted on its haunches, its cavernous red mouth serrated by jagged teeth, was open and slobbering, and the whites of its horrible eyes stood out in the gloom as it sniffed at the air. The long neck began to move downwards. One gargantuan foot thumped forward.

"Don't move," whispered Zana. "We've got to kill it first time. Fire at the head when I give the order."

The long neck brushed through the lower foliage of the trees. It looked as if it was trying to trace a scent.

"Ready," murmured Zana. "Right. NOW!"

Four staccato bursts of explosive heat flashed into the animal's head. It reared up on its hind legs, twisted half round in a lurch which snapped the surrounding trees, and let out a roar which echoed terror throughout the forest, piercing through the din of splintering trees.

"We'll be crushed to death if it turns this way," said Billy. His eyes stood out like glass marbles.

"Fire again."

The creature writhed in agony, visible tremors twitching through its body. Suddenly it lurched and fell full-length away from them, crashing down trees with its enormous bulk.

"Hell!" gasped Flash. "That was near thing. What do you think it is?"

Aloysius spoke up. "It looks very much like a pre-historic diplodocus. They've been extinct on Earth for thousands of years."

Zana mopped his brow. "So I've heard," he said slowly. "But if there's one, there must be more."

"Exactly," said Aloysius. "Listen, you can hear more in the distance."

"I don't fancy running into a herd of them," said Billy.

"No," said Zana.

"That suits me," put in Billy, with a nervous grin.

Zana holstered his gun. "We won't gain anything blundering through this lot with these creatures all around."

"I agree," said Aloysius. "If they've got to be tackled I suggest we do it in the open."

"You've got something there," agreed Flash.

"Right, about turn. And keep your eyes open."

"As wide as they'll go," said Billy, setting off in a hurry.

Arriving back at the encampment Zana sensed more trouble. He was not greatly surprised when Red came rushing out to meet him. "Have you seen Judd?" he asked anxiously.

"No."

Red clamped his hand to his head. "Every time you leave the camp something goes wrong, Zana. And this time plenty has gone wrong."

"What is it?" asked Aloysius.

Zana emitted a heavy sigh. "Let's have it, Red."

"Ashby is dead. Judd's skipped, and those two midgets have been seen again."

"What! Who saw them? Boorman?"

Red shook his head. His face twitched nervously and he pushed at his hair. "No, I saw them."

Zana grabbed hold of him urgently. "Where?"

"I was on the scanner. They came out of the forest soon after you went in."

"Then they must have fired the forest. What about Judd?"

"He killed Asbby."

"What!" Zana's eyes were glazed with incredulity.

Aloysius moved them into the hut.

"Red, where did Judd go? Why did he kill Ashby?"

"He was trying to pump information about the radio from him, but Ashby was off his head. Judd went crazy. He raved all this at me when I caught him."

"And you let him get away."

"The only way I could have stopped him was by shooting at him. I didn't think that right."

Zana flopped down on a chair. "He murdered Ashby," he said.

Red glanced at him swiftly. "Yeah, but Judd's got to come back. There's nowbere he can go."

"I'm not so sure," said Zana. "There's somebody else on the planetoid, isn't there?"

A strange silence hung over the hut.

"Well, what are you gaping at?" flashed Zana to Red. "You've seen them yourself, haven't you?"

"Yes, but——"

"But nothing. Two of you have seen the midgets. The forest

is alive with diplodocus or some such creatures, and it was deliberately fired to drive them out at us. You'd better get Alora and Boorman in. We've got decisions to make."

Billy Brown went out. The others all stared at his dumpy rereating figure. Words failed them, security had been knocked from under their feet, the future was pregnant with terrifying possibilities.

The seven Earth people sat in the wooden hut of their own construction millions of miles from their home planet. Zana had put all the facts before them. "We've got no alternative, but to stick it out and fight what we come up against," he said. "There is the radio, of course. I don't have to remind you what its use would mean."

Flash jumped up, his face flushed and earnest. "I suggest we scrap the radio," he shouted.

Zana looked at him with a tight smile on his face. "It's a consideration," he said. "All in favour?"

Only Alora failed to signify.

"You object?"

She raised her head to meet his gaze. "No, I don't want you to use it now. But I'm not sure that we ought to scrap it."

"As long as it's there we'll always be tempted," said Billy. "The radio has driven Ashby off his head and Judd to murder. Surely it's done enough damage?"

"You can look at it that way," said Zana. "But I don't wreck it without unanimous approval. Think it over, Alora."

She nodded, but would not be browbeaten.

Aloysius looked up and rubbed his chin pensively. "It is certain, however, that we must escape from the menace of the forest. Our site is too close to it to be safe."

The others chorused their agreement.

Zana held up his hand. "Then it is agreed that our future lies over the other side of the hills?"

"That seems the sensible solution," said Red.

"We certainly can't formulate any plans until we've seen what is on the other side," said Zana. "I've got an idea that we're going to receive a shock."

"What makes you think that?" asked Aloysius. His dark deep-set eyes stared hard at the ground and his fingers unconsciously fidgeted with his black beard.

Zana stood up and stretched. A thin smile flickered across his lips. "It's more than a mere hunch," he said. "The two midgets were seen disappearing into the hills and that's the direction Judd must have gone. He's obviously of the opinion that there's life over there. Why otherwise should he run away?"

"That beats me whichever way I look at it." Red's doubt was written all over his face.

"The only way to solve it is to move up to the hills ourselves," declared Zana. "We'll take all necessary equipment, but travel as light as possible. What about the radio, Alora?"

She hesitated, her eyes surveying each one of them in turn. "Do you all want to scrap it?" she asked.

"It's not a case of wanting now," said Boorman. "Somebody has got to carry it if it goes with us."

"Is that all that's worrying you?" She couldn't hide the smile on her face.

"I don't think I'll ever want to contact the E.C.B."

"Then I suggest that Zana buries it so that he alone knows it's position. Is that agreeable to you?"

They each nodded their assent.

The party set out heavily loaded in spite of their aim for lightness. The trek towards the hills was carried out speedily, but once among the jagged crags progress was greatly retarded. Then night settled over them, and the whiteness of the rock took on a ghostly appearance as they tramped forward by the light of flaming branches. When the supply of wood ran out, they had to resort to the four flash torches taken from the ship. These had to be used sparingly as refills were limited.

Above them the exquisite blackness of space was lit by myriads of celestial bodies, tips of silver light which gave no indication of what might be found on them. The party moved on with relentless slowness, escaping from the terror of the forest creatures but unsure of what would face them when they topped the uppermost rise.

By the time their world moved back into the friendly light and warmth of the sun, they had covered only half the distance to the important peak. Much of the time had been spent in rest, however. Zana had planned a renewed forward drive when they could remove hampering clothing, and with the warmth of the sun on their backs, see their way ahead. As the sun and its fiery corona came into view he let out an enthusiastic yell. It brought a loud cheer of response from his companions. They had emerged from an alien world of darkness into a world of light, which although it was still alien, held far less fear.

Zana forged ahead with Flash, scaling rugged slabs of white rock, balancing on precarious ledges and testing crumbling footholds in their pathfinding reconnaissance. Then, in a hollow shielded by a bifurcated protrusion of pumice, Zana called a halt as he stared down in horror.

One by one the others came up to him and followed his fixed

gaze. "Judd" they whispered in turn, and continued to stare.

The wrinkled face of the hairy doctor lay uppermost, features twisted in horror, the stark eyes open and bulging with fright. The murderer had been murdered, and his suffering was marked on every line of his face.

Aloysius broke the spell by stepping down into the hollow and making the Sign of the Cross over the body. He knelt down on one knee and made a quick examination. Zana joined him and asked, "What did it?"

There was a touch of panic in the ex-priest's voice as he said, "He was strangled. Look at the marks on his throat."

A prickling sensation of coldness tingled the back of Zana's neck. "Any idea how long he's been dead?"

"Not long. About a couple of hours, I should say."

Zana stood up, his eyes glinting ominously. "That means the murderer can't be far away," he murmured.

"No, not judging by our standards," said Aloysius, coming up slowly beside him.

"What do you mean?"

"Did you notice the discolouration of the neck caused by the hands?"

"Well?"

"They were midget hands."

"Then the midgets are a reality," whispered Zana.

"Very much so. And we know nothing about them. If they're natives of this planetoid they can't be judged by earthly standards. They may have powers beyond our comprehension."

"And they may not," Zana burst out angrily. "There's a midget tribe on Mars, nothing extraordinary about them."

Aloysius held up his hands to check the outburst. "I only made an observation," he said.

"Judged by our standards they're murderers," snapped Zana. "They had no reason for murdering Judd. And if they've done it to one of us, they'll not fight shy of doing it again. They can't be far away. I'm going after them."

"I'm with you," called Flash, listening from above.

"Good man. It only needs two of us." He climbed out of the hollow and turned to Red. "We'll leave the bulk of our equipment with you. You follow our trail slowly. But remember, if you rest, keep somebody on constant watch."

Freed of their load, the two men began climbing at a fast rate. They had nothing to guide them, no tangible clue, but they were spurred on by the inherent desire to survive all the planetoid could match against them.

After several hours hard climbing Zana signalled a rest. He was jumpy and restless, his eyes darting in all directions.

"What's bothering you?" asked Flash. His young face was scrubby with beard. His blue eyes burned bright.

Zana crouched down behind a covering of rock, motioning Flash to follow. "I've got an odd, sixth-sense feeling that we're being watched," he murmured.

They flattened themselves against the rock, resting, their ears alert for sound. Flash's face was white and strained, a muscle pulled at the corner of his mouth. Zana took a metal stiffener from the light valise on his back, then began taking his shirt off.

"What are you doing?" asked Flash.

"It's an old ruse, but it might work. Follow what I do."

Still puzzled, Flash obeyed. They draped their shirts over the stiffeners and topped the effigies with the slouch hats they had been wearing, pulling them well down to cover the back of the shirt neck.

"If they're armed, my bet is that they'll fire at these," said Zana.

"If they're there," Flash reminded him.

"We'll soon see." He moved forward to the edge of the rock face, beckoning to Flash.

When they were both in position Zana whispered, "If they fire, let this things drop at once. Don't give them time to discover the deception. Ready?"

They eased the crude dummies upwards so that only the heads and shoulders were visible above the rock.

Nothing happened. Flash looked sceptical.

"Jerk them around a bit," urged Zana. "Try to imitate natural movement."

A grin began to spread over Flash's face. It soon disappeared when two shots rang out and the sound of the bullets whined over his head. The effigy was knocked out of his hand without his having to concentrate on its withdrawal.

"Split up," said Zana quickly. "You get behind cover over that side. I'll stay here. They're bound to come and investigate. We'll take one each. Don't shoot unless you have to. I want at least one of them alive."

With a curt nod Flash concealed himself. They didn't have long to wait before light, crunching footsteps hurried towards them. Zana hoped that Flash wouldn't show himself too soon. Then he heard the high-pitched, sing-song cadences of their voices. His heart thumped against his bared flesh. He glanced down reassuringly at the blaster in his holster. Two booted feet appeared on the rock above him. He dived at them yelling, "Now, Flash!"

Flash responded at once. The four of them rolled in a tangled ball of flaying limbs. Zana got a grip on the soft flesh of a throat and clamped on it with all his strength, bringing his knees up and crushing them into the midget's chest.

The other midget proved more elusive. He escaped Flash's grip and rushed by Zana in an attempt to get at his pistol which had slithered down the rocks. Zana kicked out at him, sending him sprawling. But the midget was up in a moment, poised to spring back into attack. The jet of death from Flash's gun, crumpled him into a grotesque heap.

"Nice work," breathed Zana. "We've got this one to do the talking. They both lost their pistols as they came over, but you'd better go over him while I pin him down."

Flash was still staring incredulously at the dead midget. Death was no stranger to him, but he had never before delivered it out of his own hand.

Zana sensed what was going on in the youngster's mind. "Come on, snap out of it," he said. "Run your hands over this creature."

While Flash did the searching, Zana looked down at the large head and closely set slant-eyes of his captive. The hair was blue-black and the mouth purply-red. "He's a Martian, if I ever saw one," he said, as Flash nodded that he was satisfied.

The midget's lips drew back in a sneer which revealed fang-like side teeth.

"I never saw one," muttered Flash abstractedly. "I wish it had stayed that way."

Zana picked the midget up roughly, and in a passion of sudden fury, shook him until it looked as if his head would flop off. "Now talk," he said, jolting his back against the rock. "You speak the Earth tongue?"

The slant-eyes opened obliquely, bulging with apprehension.

"You're a Martian, aren't you? Speak or we'll blow your head off your body," rapped Zana, speaking Lingaplan, the universal inter-planetary language.

The midget tried to struggle, but realised he was overwhelmed. Still he didn't speak.

Zana jerked him back to his feet. "Put your blaster between his eyes and pull the trigger if he doesn't speak in five seconds."

The midget saw he was beaten. "I come from Mars . . . I come from Mars . . . I come from Mars," he gabbled, like a recording disc which would run on for ever.

Zana smiled grimly. "I thought perhaps you understood Now that you've found your tongue you'd better use it. How do you come to be here?"

"We came in a ship, of course."

Zana ignored the insolence. "Where is the ship?"

"Over the hills."

"Ah!" Zana's eyes flashed with triumph. "Now we're getting somewhere. But no ship would leave Mars manned by a complete Martian crew. There must have been M.C.B. men aboard."

The midget noticeably flinched at the mention of the M.C.B. Zana knew from experience that the Earthmen who had established the M.C.B. on Mars were hated by the Martians. The even tenor of their ways had been disturbed and the Martian resentment burned deep.

"Where were you bound for?" he asked.

"Outer space exploration."

Zana grinned. "But your hearts weren't in it, I suppose? The crew mutinied, eh?"

The midget nodded.

"And you put down here because you dare not go back?"

Although the midget didn't answer his expression was sufficient confirmation.

Zana became menacing again. "The M.C.B. bunjoes, what did you do with them?"

He didn't reply.

Zana's hands tightened their hold. "Are they dead?" he pressed.

"They . . . they not dead," spluttered the midget. "We keep them prisoner."

"Hell, E.C.B. men on this planetoid," gasped Flash.

"But held captive," Zana reminded him.

"I still don't like it."

"Neither do I." He turned to the quivering midget. "How many E.C.B. bunjoes?"

"Seven."

"How many Martians?"

"Twenty."

Zana whistled. "And bound for exploration beyond the solar system. They'll be equipped for any emergency." He kept his grip on the midget firm, but spoke to Flash. "What I can't make out is why they carried so many Marties on such a trip. There must have been a big bug in command. Somebody they were sure could handle the situation."

"Doesn't look as if he did," Flash remarked.

"No." Zana was momentarily thoughtful. "But his very presence complicates matters."

"How do you mean?"

"You know how the Control Boards work together? They won't write off one of their brass hats without making an extensive search."

Flash was silent for a moment. They both realised the urgency of the situation. "But we haven't seen any ships," said Flash, at last.

"We probably won't for some weeks, if at all. They've got no way of picking out this place from thousands of other planetoids or asteroids, unless——"

"They pick up the gravity mass?" Flash put in. "Remember, we found it unusual?"

"There's that, certainly," Zana admitted. "But they've got to get their detectors in range, and there's no reason why they should suspect anything. I was thinking that the captives would do everything in their power to get some signal back to Mars. Think of yourself in their place? That's the only hope they've got to work on."

Flash sighed, not liking the implications of his skipper's reasoning.

Zana pursed his lips and squeezed at the midget. "The chief bunjo, what's his name?" he rapped.

The midget's eyes flickered almost insolently. He had deduced that his captors were worried. "I not tell," he said.

Zana went to work on him, shaking him and manhandling him as if he were a toy in the hands of a destructive child. Finally, he set him down against the rock. "Now, what's the name of the chief bunjo?"

The midget's quivering lips clamped together defiantly. "I not tell," he repeated.

Zana's face was crimson with exertion and rage. With a mighty jerk he hoisted the midget to his feet, grabbed his jaw and forced his mouth open. "Flash, stick your blaster in his mouth and sear his tongue out," he rapped.

Only when Flash obeyed did the Martian yield with a frenzied nodding of his head. "Chief bunjo called Manat," he spluttered.

"Manat?" whispered Zana incredulously. A gleam of fear flashed into his blue eyes. He pulled the midget towards him, then hit him on the point of the jaw with a pile-driving right hand punch. The midget's head snapped back and he slumped in an awkward heap with his mouth gaping open. Zana bent down and stripped him of the Martian dark red tunic to secure him temporarily.

"Do you know this chap, Manat?" asked Flash.

"Know him? I should say I do," said Zana. "He was the one who had me kicked out of Spaceways. He's a big noise in the E.C.B. He must have been specially chosen for this outer space exploration. They won't give him up without combing the space channels inside out."

"Doesn't sound too healthy, does it?" said Flash. He grinned, but there was little humour in it.

"It all depends what we find when we get to the top of the hills. We'll keep the midget with us and squeeze out all the information we want from him. But we'll have to be careful. We won't stand any chance in an attacking raid. They outnumber us for one thing, but more important is the fact that their equipment is superior to anything we can match against

them. And there's the added possibility of the E.C.B. arriving at any time. As you say, the future doesn't look bealthy. Even if we could get the better of the Martians, there'a still Manat. You can take it from me that he's one of the ahrewdest spacemen the E.C.B. possess."

The midget sbowed signs of recovery, so they transferred their attention back to bim.

When the rear party caught up tbe climb continued. Zana trussed the midget securely, pinioning bis arms behind his back and making him walk. He took the added precaution of securing an attachment rope between himself and the Martian. When they rested, the rope was attacbed to the man on watch. Zana had no intention of allowing the captive to escape to warn his comrades.

The midget seemed to accept his captivity in a silent philosophical manner. He never spoke unless threatened into speech, and he surveyed them all with a slant-eyed insolence. His presence was unnerving. Even his disposal became a source of argument among them. Red and Boorman plumped for getting rid of him. Apart from Aloysius, the rest were neutral, but the ex-priest never stopped rejecting the suggestion of murder. It was, indeed, Aloysius who was on watch when the midget made his getaway.

Aloysius raised the camp as soon as he made the discovery. Zana shook off the effect of sleep in an instant. "Did you see him go?" he demanded.

"No. I felt a slight jerk on the rope, before I realised it, he was gone."

"You were asleep then?" charged Zana.

Red came forward, his fists bunched and menacing. "You let him go deliberately," he thundered.

Aloysius squared up to him. "Don't be a fool," he snapped. "I saw no reason for murdering him in cold blood, but I realise his danger just as much as you do."

Red was not convinced, but Zana intervened. "Arguing won't bring him back. He's still trussed about the body. He got through the attachment rope. The first things he'll try to do is get free from his bonds. We've got to move fast. We're within a few hours of reaching the final peak. That means we've got to find him before he has the chance of going over the top. Aloysius, you stay with Alora. The rest of us fan out over the rocks, investigate every possible hiding place. And if you see him, shoot to kill. Do you understand?"

Aloysius started to object.

Zana spun on him. "This is not unnecessary murder," he snapped. "If that midget gets back to the Marties, there'll be lives lost among us. Take my word for that."

"Come on. Let's get going," urged Red.

They moved off, scrambling quickly across the rocks. They had not gone far when Billy shouted, and his call was carried along the line. The pursuers made their way across the rocks to the indicated ledge. Billy pointed out the midget. In his hurry, still bound with arms behind his back, he had tried to negotiate an almost impassable crevice.

Zana stared down at the battered body and crushed head. "No need to investigate further," he said. "It ought to please Aloysius. At least, we didn't have to kill him."

They made their way back to their camp to prepare the details of the next move.

The general council wept no tears for the Martian. Even Aloysius, after making a duty visit to the scene of the accident to give the midget's soul his blessing, then settled down to the important problems of the immediate future. They all sat round on scattered pieces of equipment listening to Zana unfold his plan.

"We'll make this site our base," he said. "It's not safe for us to be higher up in case of interference from the other side. Flash and I will go up to the top to spot out the land. After that we'll keep a lookout on the peak. There's always the possibility that the Marties will send more scouts out to spy on us. They know a ship landed, and they're bound to get worried when the midgets don't return. This will be a war of nerves. It will be a case of the one who can last out the longest. That is, if the E.C.B. don't intervene."

Flash rubbed his chin thoughtfully. His eyes were distant as he stared up at the all-important peak. Something was worrying him, and when he turned to Zana, it was obvious that he was going to speak his mind. "Do you think we could co-operate with the Martians?" he asked.

Zana pressed his lips tight and his eyes narrowed. "It's not safe to co-operate with anybody," he rapped. "You're young and inexperienced, but from what you know of our own Dissentizen movement you ought to see how difficult co-operation is with another group of people. Could we agree with our own kind on Earth?"

Flash jutted his jaw resolutely. A flame of resentment burned from his eyes. "That's not the same," he countered. "We were at variance with the E.C.B. methods. The Martians have mutinied against the M.C.B. for the same reason. Surely we're allies in that respect?"

Zana looked at him sternly, then his expression simmered to tolerance. "It wouldn't work, Flash. Red will bear me out, the Marties are kicking against the control Earthmen have over

them. They wouldn't recognise us as anything different from the M.C.B. bunjoes, as they call them. They wouldn't trust us, and I certainly wouldn't trust them. How do you feel, Red?"

Red nodded his agreement. "Just as you do, Zana."

The defiance softened on Flash's face. He grinned uneasily. "It was only a suggestion," he said.

Zana got up and patted him on the back. "All right, Flash. We make allowances for your youth. You might learn a lot about astrogation at college, but you have to kick around space for a while before you get to know the space people. Come on, lad, get your instruments. We've got some figures to work out when we get to the top."

The view to the north of the planetoid was in many ways similar to that behind Zana as he stared down from a covered point of vantage. The ragged hills descended in a slightly steeper gradient to a clearing of plateau, which was bordered on one side by a belt of thick forest.

Flash was beside him, lying on his stomach, peering over a jagged ledge, a white handkerchief tied over his head to conceal his dark hair. We might almost be looking behind us," he said.

"With one essential difference," murmured Zana. "Look at the lines of that ship. She makes the old *Starchaser* look like one of the early shuttle rockets."

Admiration shone from Flash's eyes as he followed his skipper's gaze to the gleaming white ship. At college he had seen plans of such ships on the drawing boards. This was the nearest he had been to a craft specifically built for carrying Man out of the solar system. The ship towered upwards to a height of over three hundred feet. She was slim and graceful, an elegant pencil of power-packed metal. Three banks of sharp-angled fins broke the downward sweep of the body, and resting on a landing jack on her ventral side, she looked a pattern of perfect symmetry. On the lower dorsal fin a huge golden emblem of the E.C.B. stood out in the bluish light. Her name was painted on the nose and stern in bold red letters—*Asselyra.*

"She's a beauty!" whispered Flash, rapt in appreciation. "I'd give ten years of my life for a trip in her."

Zana smiled. But this chance remark brought him back to the reality of their position. "That's if you've got ten years left to give away," he said.

"Feeling cheerful, aren't you?" said Flash, with a rasp of sarcasm.

Zana was preoccupied raking the telescope over the Martian site. "There are Marties around, but no sign of the grey uniforms of the E.C.B. boys."

"Maybe they've discarded their uniforms?"

"Never," Zana assured him. "They'd keep their grey tunics buttoned high to the neck for a landing on the Sun. The E.C.B. men are even buried in full uniform."

"What about the log hut with two armed guards squatted outside? Perhaps your friend Manat and his crew are in there?"

"That's what I was thinking," said Zana, his brow puckered with thought. "There seems no other place under guard, so the chances are all the prisoners are in there together. I wonder what those heathens have done to the ship?"

"How do you mean?"

Zana pushed himself back from the ledge and rolled over on his back, cradling his head in his hands as he stared up at the star-lit blackness. "It's my bet that they've crippled the *Asselyra* in some way or other. It's their only safeguard in the event of the E.C.B. crew getting free."

"That doesn't make sense," protested Flash. "They'd cut off all chance of escape that way."

"They won't want to get away. They dare not return to their own planet, and it's ten to one that they can't navigate the ship without Manat and his men. In addition, they've not sufficient guts or iniative to go exploring uncharted space on their own. No, I reckon they're content to bog down here and try to resist all-comers. The *Asselyra* is bound to be heavily armed, and hoisted the way she is, those inside her would be in an impregnable position in the event of a ground attack."

A frown etched deep wrinkles into Flash's young face. His hands dug nervously at the crumbling rock. "You mean we don't stand much chance of making a raid on her?"

"Exactly. It would be suicidal. We'd be blasted out of existence before we got down from the hills."

"Then what's the next move?" asked Flash, looking puzzled.

"I'll leave you here and go back to the others. I'll send Boorman up. The two of you can take a watch on the peak in turn. If you've anything to report we'll have to resort to semaphore during the sunlight and torch morse in the darkness. You'll be relieved every so often by two more coming up from the main camp."

Flash nodded. "What do I look out for particularly?"

"Any of them coming up over the hills. We're in a good position as long as they don't spot us."

Flash looked at him with the starry eyes of hero worship. "What are you going to do?"

Zana grinned. "Join the E.C.B. Remember the grey uniform we found in the *Starchaser?* That's going to come in handy." He got up and patted Flash's shoulder. "Don't look so startled, lad. I've not gone completely crazy."

"Sounds pretty much like it to me."

"You'll hear about it in good time," said Zana. "Now get back to your lookout post, and don't forget your skull-cap. I don't want that black mop of hair of yours giving the game away."

The rest of the party were eagerly awaiting Zana's return. They ate from the supply of food pellets, then held a council among the white rocks. As they were sitting a flight of white birds went over them. Red leapt to his feet and went for a gun shouting, "A few of those will make a change from pellet concentrates."

Zana called him back. "No shooting, Red. We can't afford to raise an unnecessary alarm."

"I don't get it."

"The Marties might hear the shots. We don't want them coming over to investigate."

With a nod of understanding Red settled back in his place. "Well, come on, Zana. Give us the layout," he said.

"Has Boorman gone up to Flash?"

Red nodded.

Zana looked up at Aloysius sat on a ledge above them. "Can you see their position?" he asked.

Aloysius stopped trying to disengage a tangle in his jet black beard and said, "I can see right up to the peak. Boorman is half-way there."

"Good!" Zana sighed and stretched his legs. He quickly gave them an outline of what he had seen from the peak and repeated the observations he had made to Flash. "There seems to be two courses of action open to us," he went on. "Either we sit back and wait for the Martians to send more men over to see what has happened to their comrades and we knock them off as they come, or one of us goes over their side."

Alora sat up with a jolt. "There'd be no sense in one of us going over there," she said. "We'd bound to be captured."

Zana nodded. "That's the way I look at it," he said. "That's why I'm going."

A look of shocked apprehension suffused her face. "Zana, you can't," she protested.

He waved her down and looked across at Red. "I want the E.C.B. uniform out of the *Starchaser*. You go down with Billy and Aloysius, bring it back, seal the ship, and carry as much food up as you can. Alora and I will hold the fort until you get back."

Red stroked at his chin ruminatively. "Hell, what are you up to, Zana?" he queried. "You know as well as I do that the Marties are just as likely to take a pop at you and finish you off."

"It's a risk that's got to be taken."

"Why?"

Zana's colour rose. "Because it's the quickest way of forcing an issue. Manat is a top-ranking E.C.B. official. They won't let him disappear without raising a hue and cry. I reckon that they're bound to hit on the planetoid at some time or other."

Faces lined with seriousness stared back at him.

"All right, we'll accept that as reasonable. But why go in E.C.B. uniform?"

"Because I want to be imprisoned with Manat."

"What, are you crazy?"

"It's the only way of getting any inside dope, Red."

"There must be some other way."

"Not the way I see it. We're caught between two fires, on the wrong side of the E.C.B. and the Marties. But if I've got to do any bargaining to save my skin I'd sooner do it with Earthmen."

Billy Brown leaned forward. He had been whittling at a piece of wood with a jagged rock. He was cutting a model of the *Starchaser*. He held it up and grinned self-consciously, then his warm brown eyes fixed on Zana. "This is no hasty decision of yours, you've obviously thought it all out," he said. "What have you got in mind?"

"First and foremost I want to give you another ship to model."

Billy grinned. "The *Asselyra?*"

Zana nodded. "Aiming high, I guess."

"Just about as high as aiming to convert Manat into a Dissentizen," put in Red.

"Have you any idea how to get the *Asselyra?*" pressed Billy.

"None at all. But I reckon I'll stand more chance if I'm down there with the E.C.B. crew, who must be straining every nerve cell to think out a way of overpowering the Marties."

"True," admitted Red grudgingly. "But how are you going to do it?"

"I'll rely on my E.C.B. uniform to get me put in with the others. I'll tell the Marties I brought a ship from Earth to look for Manat. Impress upon them that the authorities of the whole system are after their blood. That should induce them to stay. I'll say that their two midgets set fire to the forest over here, and in the stampede of the diplodocus, the midgets and the rest of my crew were trampled to death. I'll pose as the sole survivor."

Aloysius called down from his ledge. "You might stress that the diplodocus are running amok over here. That would possibly prevent their being over-curious."

"Good idea," grinned Zana.

"What about Manat? Supposing you do get with him?" pressed Red.

Zana's eyes narrowed. "He won't be so easy to fool," he said. "But again I'll put on the sole survivor act. I'll try to tempt him with the fact that I can give the E.C.B. information of extensive deposits of white pluronium on another planetoid I touched on, that I'm willing to trade this information for my pardon. I've still got Judd's specimen piece of ore. That ought to make my story more convincing."

"If he falls for the other planetoid ruse."

"I'll think up a good story for that."

"Sooner you than me with Manat's beady eyes raking you," said Red.

Zana mopped his brow with the back of his hand. "I'll get by," he said.

"If anybody can do it, you can, Zana," said Alora.

"Thanks." He got up and forked his fingers through his hair to conceal his embarrassment. With a noticeable croak in his voice he said, "Now let's start making preparations. While you're away I'm going to plant a dynamite trap on the peak. It can be used as a signal or as a means of defence, according to how things go."

The Martians showed no sign of sending out further investigators from their diminished numbers. Sunlight passed and then a full phase of darkness without further development. The party to the *Starchaser* had made the journey downhill and returned. All was ready for Zana's departure. He stood before his comrades, tall, powerfully-built and smiling in the grey E.C.B. uniform.

"All set?" asked Red.

Zana nodded, looking over himself and checking the papers found in the uniform. "Reckon I've got everything," he said.

There was a momentary silence, then Billy came up, and with an obvious depth of sentiment, handed him a blaster. "You'd better take this, Zana."

The tension struck Zana with its sincerity. He playfully ruffled his hand through Billy's straight hair. "You keep it," he said. "The Marties will only take it, and we might need it for a showdown later on."

Red stroked his jaw. "I'm hanged if I can see this crazy move of yours coming off," he said dismally.

"That's up to me," fired Zana, his mouth clamping in a thin, determined line. "You understand the drill? I've got no way of establishing contact with you, so we'll have to use Alora's orange hair drape."

"Suffering moonshine!" gasped Red. "This set-up gets more farcical every minute."

"Perhaps," snapped Zana. "But necessity is the mother of invention. The orange drape is probably the only object of this

colour on the disc. As such it will be outstanding—a clear signal. If I'm in difficulties I'll try to display in a way which the look-out can see it. If I'm unable to do that, I'll have to leave any move to your initiative, Red. If you think things down there are becoming sticky and your intervention will do any good, well, that's up to you. Let off the dynamite or something, but don't act hastily."

Extra years brought on by his increased responsibility already etched Red's tough features. He put out his hand, it was visibly trembling. "Good luck, you son of a space rat," he said. "You're the biggest idiot I know, and the damned bravest. Take care of yourself."

Red turned away, overcome by emotion. Zana glanced at the others and raised his hand in a general farewell. Alora came forward and reached up with both her hands on his shoulders. She kissed him on both cheeks as the tears glistened in her eyes.

Zana eased himself away and grinned sheepishly. "You'd better go and give a dose of that to Red," he said. "I don't want him getting jealous."

There was a light ripple of nervous laughter and Zana took advantage of it to get away. He had decided to detour the peak and take the longest way round so that he could approach the Martian encampment from the side, thus minimising the chances of their suspecting that he had left comrades behind.

As soon as he came into view of the encampment, he hoisted his flag of truce on a branch specially cut from the forest, then walked forward with measured strides. Even from a distance he could see signs of frenzied activity among the Martians. He smiled to himself, thinking of Flash watching these movements from the peak. He held his head erect, trying to dismiss the thought of a sudden shot spurting out to end his interest in all future development. But he was conscious of lenses trained upon him and could imagine the excitement aroused among the aliens. They would identify him as an Earthman at once, and as such, an enemy. One uncontrolled trigger finger could put a stop to him. He was bargaining, however, on the confusion his appearance would cause.

When Earthmen had first invaded Mars they found a race of primeval creatures resisting their advance. Their puny efforts to save their homeland had been futile, and in time they had been subjugated and modernised. With his usual tolerance, Man had fraternised with the women and set about educating the natives. They had done this to an extent that the Martians had become useful to them, but the original resentment was never effaced. The Marties struck back at the Earthmen whenever they possibly could. Their retaliation was nearly always of a brutal nature. Their brains did not rise to artifice. They could be trained to run along trammelled lines, but when their minds

were called upon to understand a highly complex operation or make a difficult decision, they degenerated into the atavistic state of mental stagnation.

The hesitancy of their action now emphasized this, thought Zana. The *Asselyra* must have been taken by sheer weight of numbers, but now that they were on the planetoid they didn't know what to do. They had allowed the E.C.B. men to live. Why? They were scared of the repercussions, unsure of how to organise themselves on virgin territory.

Zana quickened his pace as he came to a smoother decline. The argument within himself stopped raging. It had only been a cloak for his nervousness. But if a blaster was to spit at him he wanted it to come quick. He was obsessed by the ridiculous desire to run headlong down the hill. With difficulty he held himself in check and resumed his measured advance. It was like standing before a firing squad hour after hour, waiting for the ultimate order which would end everything.

At last he reached the clinging blue undergrowth of the plateau, gasped a sigh of relief as he saw a party of five coming out to intercept him. They marched towards each other in a geometrically straight line, eyes fixed ahead, searching, apprehensive. So remorseless was the advance that it looked as if they would walk through each other. Then Zana heard the order to halt.

He stopped dead in his tracks, surveying the Martians with pin-pointed eyes. The man in the centre was a huge creature standing over seven feet in height. As he advanced, the two on each side of him stood with golden glinting weapons pointing at Zana's heart.

"Who are you?" asked the leading Martian.

Zana lowered his white flag. "Lieutenant Kobro of the Earth Control Board," he said, in a falsely confident voice.

The big man glanced back at his companions. Mention of the E.C.B. had shaken him, thought Zana. Panic flickered in the black slant-eyes. His mouth was quivering as he turned back. his head was monstrously large and a double chin ran into a thick bull neck. In a hand-to-hand fight the giant could crush the average Earthman to pulp, but intelligence, as Zana surmised, was not his strong point.

"How come you here?" asked the giant.

"I brought a ship in search of High Commander Manat of the *Asselyra*."

The huge mouth gaped open, trickles of saliva gathering in the corners.

"You saw my ship come in?" put in Zana, to bridge the silent gulf.

The giant nodded.

"My ship was wrecked and the radio knocked out. Three of

my crew were killed," Zana went on.

Hope leapt into the slant-eyes. "You not radio Earth?"

Zana gestured with despondency.

The giant retreated to his comrades, then after whispering with them in his own tongue, came back to his position in front of Zana. "Have you seen two dwarfs?" he asked.

Zana laughed scornfully. "Did you tell them to fire the forest?" he asked.

The huge head nodded.

"And I suppose you know what is in the forests of these parts?"

Again the giant glanced back at his bodyguards. All their heads veered fearfully towards the forest. Zana grinned to himself. He could easily have rushed them if it would have been of any avail. "Your firing plan didn't do the midgets much good. The forest creatures stampeded from the fire. They killed your men and the rest of my crew."

"Why not you?"

"The tree I climbed was not trampled down. The others couldn't get away fast enough. I watched them all crushed to pulp under the tramping hooves of the forest monsters. Over the other side of the hills they are running amok. That's why I had to come over to you."

The Martians all stared up at the peak.

"Will they come over?" asked one of the bodyguard, blaster trembling in his hand.

Zana smothered his grin. "Not without warning," he assured them. "I planted an explosive charge from my ship on the other side of the peak. If that goes off——" He broke off and gesticulated his hands in resignation.

Whilst they conferred Zana noticed that the ship was manned and the armament blisters extended, which confirmed his view that any surprise rush would have been foolhardy. He also noticed with rising trepidation that the Martians seemed undecided as to what to do with him. One of them had pointed to the prison hut, but another had wagged his head and spoken voluby. Zana waited in an agony of torment. All his plans had been based upon his being imprisoned with Manat. He had to get some idea of the situation from the E.C.B. men's viewpoint.

After what seemed an interminable time, the Martians reached agreement. Two of them marched forward with pistols prominent and stood behind him. A third came over, went through his pockets and relieved him of everything. He had Alora's drape tied round his leg, but although the searching hand touched upon it, it was not removed. They did, however, confiscate the specimen of white pluronium. After which he was given the order to march, and with a deep sigh of relief he saw that he was being led towards the wooden hut. So far so good. Now he had to play up to friend Manat.

The two guards stood aside as the door was opened. Their slant-eyes glinted evilly and their features were sullen as their hands tightened to the butts of the golden pistols. Zana didn't have to be warned of the folly of a false move. He walked straight into the hut and stood in the centre as the door slammed on him.

The inside of the prison hut was vile. There were no windows, and the only light came in through the chinks of the ill-fitting door. He stood still in the murky atmosphere, letting his eyes become accustomed to the gloom. Then he saw the seven bedraggled men gaping at him in stunned silence. Their clothes were littered round the sides of the hut to provide some kind of sleeping comfort. The confined space reeked of suffering humanity. The faces of the men were haggard and emaciated, eye sockets hollowed in blackness and pupils glaring. Their predicament was grim, thought Zana, for they had all abandoned their grey tunics.

The tallest of them came forward, his savage eyes peering through the bad light to the very depths of Zana's face. "Who the devil are you?" he snapped, in an authoritative voice.

In spite of the man's condition Zana needed no re-introducing to Manat. "Somebody you should recognise," he said curtly.

The eyes continued peering and the mind scrabbled for recognition. "Dench," murmured Manat, at last. "Space-pilot First Class Dench, late of the Dissentizen movement." A fierce, dry laugh crackled in his throat. "What brings you to this hell spot?"

Zana looked around. There was nothing in the hut at all apart from the men and their clothes. "Shall we sit down?" he said. "It looks as if we're going to be together for some time."

Manat nodded. to the others. In the dismal light Zana couldn't see their faces properly. He didn't bother to probe. Manat was his man. The others were trained like automatons to follow his desires and decisions.

"Well, Dench, to what do we owe this surprise intrusion?" said Manat stiffly. "Where did you get the uniform? A grave charge wearing that under false pretences."

The unalterable Manat, thought Zana. A fiend for regulation. "A relic from the *Starchaser*," he said. "I used it to fool the Marties."

"To what purpose?" The question came like a whiplash.

Zana deliberately lingered over the answer. "I particularly wanted to be with you."

Manat's normally thin features, now ravaged by privation, twisted fiendishly. "You can cut out the funny talk," he fired "I heard that you escaped. I had a signal to lookout for the *Starchaser*. The Board weren't greatly worried, they didn't expect you to get very far."

"I got as far as the *Asselyra*," Zana reminded him. "And further. This was my second port of call."

"And the first?"

"An interesting place," said Zana. "I found something there which should interest the E.C.B."

"What?"

"Rich deposits of white pluronium."

"Well?"

"I'm willing to give this information to the Board in exchange for my pardon."

Manat was silent for several seconds. "No longer keen on being a Dissentizen?" he asked, at last.

"I'm on my own now, Manat. One man can't do much against an organisation as strong as the E.C.B. But I believe I can help you. That's why I'm here."

"You know the consequences you'll have to suffer for your subversive activities. I can't do anything about that."

"You can, and you know it," snapped Zana. "You and your crew can also take the bonus for the white pluronium find. All I want to do is return to Terra."

Manat's eyes were fixed upon him, the shrewd mind working feverishly. He rubbed his long, thin nose with his hand, then asked, "How can you help?"

"I don't know yet. That depends on your situation."

"You can see it for yourself."

"What about the *Asselyra?*"

Manat stared at him keenly. One of the officers started to speak. The Commander cut him to silence. "You say you're on your own, Dench. How's that?"

"Did you know that the Marties sent two midgets to investigate the arrival of my ship?"

Manat wagged his head.

"But you must have known that there were two midgets on the crew strength. Well, there aren't any more. They fired the forest on the other side and started a stampede of diplodocus."

"Of what?" gasped Manat.

"Forest creatures. Huge things standing seventy feet high, like prehistoric animals."

Manat scoffed.

"They're in this forest as well," Zana assured him. "You should have seen the faces of the Marties when I mentioned them. Anyway, my whole crew were caught in the stampede. One of the midgets, too. I nabbed the other and forced information from him. Why do you think I came over here otherwise?"

Manat leaned back, his face creased in thought, slim shoulders bent. "I don't know," he said, after a long pause. "Your story

sounds so fantastic that it might be true. Have you any specimens of the white pluronium?"

A flicker of hope rose within Zana. Manat was interested. Even in his present position he was thinking of the kudos of making such a discovery. It would cover his mistake in allowing his ship to be taken over by mutineers.

"I did have," said Zana. "Until the big chap relieved me of it."

"What about the *Starchaser?* Is she fit to launch?"

"Not a chance," said Zana. "The underside of the body was ripped out. She lost all her air in a matter of minutes."

"Any other damage?"

"No."

Manat leaned forward anxiously. "Your radio?" he breathed.

"In perfect order."

Even in the gloom Manat's eyes were afire with enthusiasm. "Is the radio in your ship?"

"No," said Zana, with clipped emphasis.

"Where?" Manat's voice was high-pitched and urgent. A shaft of light from the crack of the door hinges cut across his face, casting it into a devilish pattern of light and shadow. His long fingered hand reached out and clasped Zana's forearm. His body was tensed for the reply.

Zana grinned with defiance. "It's in a sealed box buried in a place in the hills. Another location known only to me."

"You've taken laudable precautions." Manat was breathing heavily. The other men were listening with avid interest, but not one of them dared to intervene.

"I thought it necessary," said Zana smugly.

With a nervous toss of his head Manat flicked his long black hair from his brow. He stood up, peered around for room to pace, sighed heavily, then sat down again. "You seem to have made one mistake, however," he said. "Why did you bring all your crew from the pluronium planetoid?"

Zana hesitated only for a moment. "Like the E.C.B. we were doubtful of the ability of the *Starchaser* to take us very far. We ran into trouble early on, three of our jets were knocked out. We didn't want to split our ranks. Anyway, there was trouble among us. We launched with eight men and one woman."

A harsh laugh rasped from Manat's dry lips. "You could have risked contacting the Board from the planetoid."

"You know as well as I do that their detectors would have picked up our transmission and established our position in a few minutes."

"True," murmured Manat. "But you're sure you still have a serviceable radio?"

Zana nodded. He waited in the heavy silence, realising that

Manat was assaying every point of his story. The expression on his face was twisted and menacing. Zana comforted himself with the thought of Flash on the hill-top. It was torture waiting to see which way Manat would turn.

That he was in doubt was proved when he suddenly addressed his subordinates. "Do any of you gentlemen see any flaws in this man's story?"

They looked at each other in a flutter of panic. None of them uttered a word which would later incriminate them.

"If I can use my influence to obtain a pardon for Dench, are you all agreed that we take advantage of the material benefits he offers?"

Another huddle produced a hurried nodding of heads.

"Any objections?"

No answer.

"Any questions?"

Zana breathed an inner gasp of relief.

"Now, Dench, what have you in mind?" rapped Manat.

Zana glanced at the door. "What about the guards outside?" he asked anxiously.

"They don't understand our language."

"The others did."

"I know my own crew," snapped Manat hotly.

There was an obvious rejoinder to this remark, but Zana kept it to himself. "Do you expect help from the E.C.B.?" he asked.

"Of course."

"You know there is a dense asteroid belt within the orbit of the planetoid? It makes unassisted landings precarious."

"I realise that."

"Do you also realise that this is an uncharted planetoid a long way from any of the recorded space routes?"

"I have every confidence in the Board discovering us. What are you trying to suggest?"

"That there is every possibility of their not hitting on this place in a hundred years of exploration and search."

All eyes gaped at him in awed wonderment.

"I won't admit that," rasped Manat. But he was visibly shaken, nevertheless.

"The possibility exists, whether you admit it or not. The only real hope is to use the *Asselyra* to get away."

Manat looked at him searchingly. "Have you got anything in mind? What about the radio? One signal over the sound band would be sufficient for them to plot our position."

"What about the *Asselyra's* radio?"

"Wrecked. The mutineers knew it was a source of danger to them, so they smashed it with hatchets."

"Did they do any other damage?"

Manat fell for it. "They pulverised the bricks from the atomic pile. The *Asselyra's* power unit is dead cold."

This stunned Zana momentarily. Without the bricks of fissionable material the *Asselyra* was useless. He raked his brain, then hit on the obvious solution. "What about the bricks from the *Starchaser?* Was the *Asselyra* standard FBX type?"

"Yes."

"There's the question solved," said Zana gleefully. "The *Starchaser's* fission bricks will heat the *Asselyra's* pile. All the refinements you had fitted are in the power distribution and pump apparatus. The standard bricks will perform the fundamental function."

"It might work," admitted Manat. "But if we can get to your radio, that would be a better proposition."

"Perhaps," murmured Zana. He was mentally going through the work required to launch the *Asselyra.*

A short, wizened little E.C.B. man spoke up. "In the meantime, we're still stuck here," he reminded them. He poked out his jaw as if to emphasize that this reminder was necessary.

"Well, Dench, what do you say to that?"

"Who brings your food?"

Manat looked at him queerly. "Two galley hands from the ship," he said, at last.

"Do they speak English?"

"Yes."

"Good! Every time they come we'll be talking about the forest creatures."

Manat clicked his tongue with irritation. "What do you hope to gain by that?"

"You can scoff at the diplodocus, Manat," said Zana forcibly. "But they're real. The Marties have seen them and they're scared of them. I've already put them on edge with the accounts of my adventures on the other side of the hills. These galley hands are bound to go back and repeat what they've heard."

"What if they do?"

"I'm hoping that they'll get so scared that they'll pull me out of here to help them."

"And then?"

"That will be up to me."

Manat lolled back deep in thought. He didn't like it, but he had no option.

Acting on his plan, Zana was always discussing the forest

creatures in vivid terms when the Martians appeared with the rations of water and purponut. He noticed with satisfaction their faces visibly blanched. One of them even dropped a vessel of water. Then different men were sent with the food. As Zana reckoned, the change was to confirm what the others had heard. His tales became even more hair-raising. Luck came to his aid when he was calculating how much of the light cycle remained, for the forest reverberated with the roars of the diplodocus. Even Manat admitted to being convinced.

Inside the prison hut they heard the commotion outside. There were squeals of panic and high-pitched orders. The guards on the door screeched at their disorganized comrades.

"Shall we rush them now?" asked one of the E.C.B. officers.

Manat hesitated.

Zana stepped in. "Don't be a fool," he snapped. "They'll naturally go to the ship for protection. Once in there they could blast heat into us at will. We'd be charred remains before we covered a dozen yards."

The *Asselyra* crew were all on their feet, but Zana's outburst stayed their desire for immediate action.

"He's right," said Manat. Then reassuming his authority snapped, "Sit back and wait orders."

"If they're ever going to come for me, they'll come now," said Zana. He unwound the orange drape from his leg and stuffed it into his shirt front.

Manat eyed him suspiciously. "What are you up to?"

"I have my methods." He stopped still, arresting every movement. "Listen, there's somebody approaching."

The hurried footsteps became louder. The door was flung open to admit a blinding burst of light. The prisoners retreated into the protective gloom of the corners.

"Lieutenant Kobro, come out," shrieked a voice. "You others stay. The guards have orders to shoot to kill anybody else who comes through the door."

Zana moved forward, shielding his eyes against the light.

"It's up to you," murmured Manat.

"Roger," hissed Zana. He grinned to himself, appreciating how this cryptic remark would plunge Manat in doubt. It could mean anything.

Outside the door he was immediately grabbed by the arms and hurried along. He blinked owlishly, trying to delay to accustom his eyes to the light. He was dragged on remorselessly by the blurred shapes on each side of him.

"Latyli wants you," one of them said. "The forest creatures are coming."

They could come, thought Zana. Anything to get him nearer to the *Asselyra*.

Latyli, the giant, was standing beside the ship quivering with fear. His huge body seemed shrunken, as if he was trying to telescope himself into non-existence. "Why do the forest creatures roar?" he asked Zana.

"They roar before they attack."

A babble of noise broke out in gabbling unison.

"Get into the ship," snapped Zana, anxious to look her over. "Train all the guns on the forest. I've dealt with these creatures before. I know how to handle them."

The Martians scampered to obey him. The two guards screeched from the prison hut door. "Tell them to stay," said Zana. "Our guns will protect them."

In the flurry of the moment it wasn't noticed that he was ordering his supposed comrades to be kept in captivity. Inside the ship Zana made full use of his freedom. The Martians looked to him for guidance in the emergency and he gave directions to suit his purpose—those which took him through the most important cabins of the ship. He was even able to try out various pieces of equipment. Finally, he mounted himself at the long-range viewer, ostensibly to watch the forest.

Hour after hour passed and the Martians became restless. Then another roar reinfused them with fear. In his viewing Zana saw something which set the blood pounding in his head. He switched in the infra-red filter and watched it for several seconds before admitting the truth to himself. Picking its way through the cosmic dust of the asteroid belt was a space-ship.

Zana's head swam in a maelstrom of quick thought. The ship was undoubtedly coming through to land. A pinkish ray of a haze diffuser shone out from her nose. This was the E.C.B. coming to exact her retribution on mutineers and Dissentizens alike.

He snatched at the intercomm microphone and summoned Latyli. The giant came blustering into the observation chamber. "The E.C.B. are coming," said Zana, jerking his attention to the viewer eyepiece.

The huge mouth flopped incredulously open. But Latyli believed his eyes. "What do we do?" he gasped, turning to Zana.

If the situation had not been so tense he would have laughed. He hadn't reckoned upon becoming fairy godmother to a bunch of Martes. "Get out of the ship, every one of you. You saw the pink ray?"

Latyli nodded.

"That's to fire this ship."

"But the forest creatures?" The man was paralysed by two-fold fear.

"They won't attack with that ship coming in. If you want

to save yourselves get up into the hills."

The Martian remained wild-eyed and fixed by panic for several moments. Agonizing moments for Zana, for he wondered if the giant was at last coming to his senses. But Latyli glanced through the lucitore observation bulge again. A second sight of the approaching ship completely unnerved him. He tumbled through the bulkhead door gabbling distractedly at his comrades. The ship resounded with Bedlamic discord. With a tight grin of satisfaction, Zana heard the clatter of the general exodus. The observation bulge in the upper half of the *Asselyra* gave him a 360 degree view outside. All his instruments swivelled through a complete circle, and he also had one of the new type hyper-blast guns with a full circle of fire.

He left his position and quickly raced through the ship thumbing all the locking circuits into operation. Breathlessly he returned to the bulge, noticing as he passed through the pilot's cabin that there was a master locking circuit switch on the control board. He cursed himself for his shortsightednesss and picked up the ship in the viewer. She was pitching badly, finding it heavy going through the asteroid belt.

A thousand fragmentary thoughts flashed across his mind as he tried to decide what action to take. It was no use summoning his crew from the peak with the Martians running hell-crazy across the plateau. Then he saw the two guards run from the prison hut. This decided him. He swung the gun and blasted them. With a violent swerve he swept the gun round and raked the fleeing Martians with death-searing heat.

His brow was flecked with sweat as he realised that Manat and his men were now free to escape. But they had no weapons. The Martian mutineers were all shrivelled up and their pistols burned to uselessness. Now was the time to signal his own crew. They were armed and could round up the E.C.B. prisoners, who couldn't get into the *Asselyra*. Again he focused the viewer on the ship in circuit. He toyed with the idea of shooting at her, but remembered what Manat had said about the fission bricks. The light armament was run off an auxiliary power unit, but the space cannon had to be powered from the main pile, which was dead cold.

He saw the prison hut door swing inwards. He jumped to the gun and sent a burst of heat burning across a possible escape path. The blue undergrowth shrivelled up, leaving a charred black groove, a reminder to Manat that he was in line of fire. It ought to keep him in the hut temporarily.

With his attention divided between the viewer and the hut, Zana withdrew Alora's orange drape. He snapped off the master locking circuit switch so that he could open a plasteel inspection panel. He let the drape flutter, then released it and flicked

the master switch home. Before returning to the viewer he put another burst across the hut door.

He sat back on the sprung seat and mopped his brow. It all depended on where the ship landed now. If it was close he could perhaps terrorize the crew with his hyper-blast gun. If she landed far away, then he would have to go after them and wage an all-deciding battle. He watched the ship's approach with concentrative eyes, trying to work out how far a stall and fire landing would take her over the planetoid.

The pinkish ray of the haze diffuser was the harbinger of her approach, but through the eyepiece he could now see the purply-red exhaust flames of her jets. He followed them with fascinated interest as the ship streaked across the alien blackness. Then another streak of long-tailed orange fire caught his eye. It was travelling at prodigious speed, overtaking the ship.

"A meteor," he murmured. His throat burned with sensation and pain stabbed at the back of his eyes.

The impact came with a flash of blinding light. The ship exploded amidships and burst into a thousand fragments. A vivid picture burned on his brain with such intensity that he could almost hear the noiseless crunching of metal. Several figures were catapulted from the erupting wreckage. Grey uniformed men floated out into space, their limbs clawing at the emptiness. The bodies bloated with death, then they were jolted into the maw of the asteroid belt. No longer men. No longer a menace to his freedom.

Zana was so astounded that he continued to stare long after all signs of the ship and its crew were obliterated. Then he became aware of the group standing outside the prison hut gaping up at the ebony heavens. So Manat had seen something of the accident! He must have realised that the ship was searching for him.

The danger of the situation galvanised Zana into action. That ship might have seen the *Asselyra*. It might have radioed the position of the planetoid. That meant another ship could be expected. He had to work fast. He moved to the gun and sent a searing blast of warning close to the stupefied E.C.B. men. He hoped that they would dash back into the hut, but they deployed to fresh cover, close to the ship, out of range of the gun.

They couldn't get into the ship so Zana decided to sit tight and wait for Red's arrival. They would come prepared for trouble, instinctively on their guard against E.C.B. men.

Time passed in slow motion before Red, Billy and Flash reached the plateau. Manat made a dash for the forest, but Zana cut him off by firing the gun in front of him and driving him back.

Red did the rest, and when Zana came out of the ship, all the E.C.B. men were strung together with three guns pointed at

them. The rest of the *Starchaser* survivors were crossing the plateau.

Manat made a move as Zana clambered down the ladder from the outer airlock door. Red also moved, his eyes blazing his intention.

Manat had the sense to remain still. "Your crew, I suppose?" he snapped at Zana.

Zana nodded. "I had to conceal their presence. You might have blabbed to the Marties. Forgive me, but it was a chance I couldn't afford to take."

"You know there was a rescue ship coming for us?" snapped Manat.

"I do. Remember I told you landing here would be difficult?"

"But they've sighted the planetoid. The position has been radioed to Earth."

Zana's eyes narrowed. "That might be so," he granted. "On the other hand, it might not. I think our best bet is to get the *Asselyra* ready for launching."

Red flashed a glance at Zana. "We saw the ship," he said. "There might be another soon."

"But if we launch and take Commander Manat and his crew back to Terra, we are more likely to earn our pardon."

"Earn our pardon? You know as well as I do that——"

"Shut up!" snapped Zana. "Manat has promised to use his influence on my behalf. He'll extend that offer to cover us all if we take him back to Terra. Is that not so, Commander? For the agreed consideration, of course."

"Zana, what's got into you?" asked Red.

"Shut up!" He turned to Manat. "Well, Commander?"

"What game are you playing, Dench?" snapped Manat, his lips curled in a sneer.

"I want a guaranteed pardon for myself and my crew."

Red swung round angrily, brandishing his gun. "You can count me out of any trip back to——"

"You'll do just as I say," fired Zana. "You seem to have forgotten that I'm still in command. You're coming back to Terra, Anzoin. Do you think I'm going to leave you here with the woman?" He laughed out loud and glanced at Alora contemptuously. "She's caused enough trouble among us already. I don't intend spending the rest of my life in unknown space fighting for her favours."

The sneer widened on Manat's face. "In that case perhaps we'd better get the *Asselyra* space-worthy," he said.

Suddenly Zana leapt at Red, knocked his gun spinning away from the E.C.B. group, then cracked him viciously on the point of the jaw. Red went down with a groan. Alora let out a piercing cry.

Zana flashed a blazing glance at her. "I thought as much," he seethed. "Pick him up one of you. I'll take the gun and see that he doesn't get another. Well, Manat, do we work together?"

The Commander looked at him with a wry smile on his face. There was hope in his eyes as he said. "I think we can come to terms."

Throughout the ensuing light period Zana drove his own crew and the E.C.B. men at slave pace. Even when darkness submerged the planetoid he kept them moving towards the *Starchaser*. All the necessary fittings and apparatus were stripped from her, then began the long trek back. Zana kept the seed of disharmony flourishing among his crew, particularly with Red, who after having the situation explained to him, played the part of the rebel admirably. Alora also put on some convincing performances for Manat's benefit.

The race, however, was against time. Zana hardly spared himself a moment's rest. His haggard eyes were continually fixed to the telescope, scouring among the stars for the light of a ship. They were all on edge and jumpy, many of the outbursts of temper were not rehearsals. They were half-way up the hills when Zana sighted the unfamiliar speck in the black sky. He stood still, heart beating like a triphammer, telescope fixed to his eye in the hope that he was wrong. But concentration only confirmed his suspicions—there *was* another ship attempting to land on the planetoid. The all-important question now was on which side of the hills would it land? If it landed on the *Starchaser* side they had a fighting chance. If on the other side, the E.C.B. men were bound to take control of the *Asselyra* before any of the Dissentizens could reach it.

Zana drew Red aside and gave him a gun. There was no time for play acting now. "There's another ship coming through the asteroid belt," he said.

"The E.C.B.?" queried Red.

"Who else?" He handed Red the telescope

"No doubt about that, it's a ship all right." Red spat with a useless sort of vehemence.

Zana's eye were alert. "If she makes it, it won't be long before Manat has it in view. We must round the E.C.B. men up, you go round with Flash and Boorman and huddle them in a group. If they should see the ship and make a break, shoot to kill."

"With pleasure," said Red. "I've a few scores to settle with these swine."

Zana grabbed his arm. "Easy, Red. Everything depends on this."

Their eyes met and they understood each other.

Manat was quick to sense the change in the attitude of his captors. His furtive eyes immediately turned skywards. But

Red and the others had the E.C.B. men grouped and covered with blasters before the ship became visible to the naked eye.

Zana stood on a prominent rock above them. "Here comes your relief, Manat," he shouted.

All E.C.B. eyes turned upwards. They broke into a cheer as they sighted the ship. Zana fired a pistol shot to silence them. "Listen!" he roared. "You all sit tight exactly as you are if you want to live. My men have orders to shoot to kill, and if they miss I can finish the lot of you off from up here. Sit tight and wait. This is one move in the game which neither of us can do much about. We both want to see how the dice rolls. But don't break your rank or *your* interest in the future will be over."

He saw Manat flash glances towards both sides of the hills, obviously summing up the situation, realising how much depended on the point of landing.

The heaped banks of stars above cast their silvery light like radiant holes in a gigantic backcloth. Stars, countless stars, more stars; but only one sparkle of purply-silver light of momentary importance, growing larger as it approached. Dimming now as it came through the belt of spatial dust, but pushing its way through with inexorable determination. No longer a speck of light, it elongated into a cylindrical shape of ever-growing proportions. Pitching and yawing, fighting to break through. It emerged triumphant. Zana could imagine the pilot selecting a landing spot, anxious about the effect of uncontrollable drift. The downward curve was jagged and eccentric, but the ship came down on her tail, spitting flame and exhaust gases. It was plain to see, however, that control was difficult, the pilot in open combat with a damaged ship and unknown conditions.

Soundlessly she came, heading for the forest belt. The curve widened towards the *Starchaser*. Then they must have seen the *Asselyra*. A last minute correction didn't come off. The outriggers extended, crumpled like box wood as they touched down. The huge cylinder wavered, then flopped over on her underside.

Sweat stood out on Zana's brow. Out of the corner of his eye he saw one of the E.C.B. men bolt. Boorman's heat ray spat out instantaneously with his own, converging on the grey-uniformed body which was crumpled to a helpless bundle of twisted limbs. Drastic action had been needed on the spur of the moment; it acted as a deterrent to the others.

Flash came across, his young face showing signs of strain. "That was close, Zana," he said. "Lucky for us they spotted the *Asselyra* too late. Do you think there's anybody alive in the ship?"

"Certain of it. The underside emergency absorbers would take most of the shock of impact."

"Well, what do we do now?"

"Climb—the higher we get up the hills, the better our chances of holding our position."

"And the nearer we get to the *Asselyra*."

"Exactly. You go on ahead on your own, Flash. Try to reach the summit. Use your old observation post and the same signals we devised before."

"Right." He collected up his equipment and started off instantly, unsmiling, with none of his old confidence.

Zana leapt down from his vantage point and skirted round the E.C.B. huddle.

"You murderous swine, Dench," Manat yelled at him. "You'll pay for this. The position of the planetoid is now known. Even if this ship can't do anything, you can be sure that the Board will send more."

"Shut up, Manat!" flashed Zana. These observations touched on the raw of his own thoughts. Time again became the potential enemy; time and a combatant crew probably emerging any minute. And time could swell the numbers of the opposing forces, establish advancing columns coming from front and rear. But the problem was one of the moment, conditions as they presented themselves immediately had to be combated.

He called to Red. "Rope them all up together and keep them moving upwards. We won't try to fight it out until we reach the summit and hold the advantage. Once up there we ought to be able to hold any crew back."

They soon saw actively round the landed ship. The emergency escape hatches were flung open and mechanised armament trundled out. Zana soon saw that he had made the best initial move in continuing the climb. It had its disadvantages, however, for the E.C.B. task force were out of small armament range.

Red sat crouched behind Zana, eyes concentrated on the preparations below. "They've come ready for a fight," he said.

Zana nodded. "But we've got to keep them on this side of the hills if we're to stand a chance of getting the *Asselyra* away."

"And do it in double quick time," put in Aloysius, who had been behind them listening.

They all had guns resting in their laps, their attention divided between the E.C.B. prisoners and attackers.

"They're going to be the trouble," said Red, nodding towards Manat and his crew. "They'll make a bolt for it on the first opportunity. The best thing we could do is write the lot of them off now."

Aloysius started to object, but Alora spoke up with surprising vehemence. "I agree with Red. It's going to come to a case of us or them. We're not in position to consider humanitarian problems."

Aloysius stared at her with hard, piercing eyes. "You're quite wrong, Alora," he said. "Whatever we do we have to maintain our human sense of values. Once we toss them aside we have lost everything. Do we not intend to establish a community of our own? If we kill when every obstacle presents itself the habit will stick. The rule of the survival of the strongest will reign among ourselves as well as our enemies."

This exposition was suddenly interrupted by a cascade of rock falling all round them. Boorman and Billy Brown yelled from their sentry positions over the prisoners.

"They're firing at the rocks above us!" cried Alora, in alarm. Another loud explosion followed her remark.

Zana jumped to his feet and ran to the group of prisoners sheltered behind jutting rocks. Aloysius followed, querulous and inquiring. Zana faced up to him with eyes blazing. "I've expressed no opinion about your principles," he said, above the noise of the confusion. "I'll act as I think fit."

He pointed his gun at Manat. "Your friends are peppering us," he shouted. "They obviously don't know that you're here. We'll have to make you show yourselves. Put on your grey tunics and climb out of this hollow on to the crags above, where you can be seen. Now move! We've got you all covered! Take one step out of place and we'll blast you."

A fair-haired youngster from the fringe of the bunch made a sudden flying dive at him. Zana saw him just in time, quickly sidestepped and shot his attacker where he fell. "Any more of you need convincing?" he shouted.

The E.C.B. men moved faster now, muttering and sullen. The Dissentizens guided them out into the open. The firing from below immediately ceased.

Aloysius muttered over the body of the youngster, then dragged him away. "I'll see to the burial," he said to Zana. He caught hold of his arm. "That move was necessary, but don't let it go to your head. Don't violate the sanctity of human life without an adequate cause."

"You'll have to trust me to do what the situation warrants," he said shortly. "Billy, climb up behind Manat's mob and see if Flash is all right."

The climb upwards continued, guided by Flash. The E.C.B. hostages were kept out in the open to avoid long-distance firing. Everything seemed to be working to plan. After a rest period, Zana arranged the prisoners in their marching formation. Manat's pinched features were grimly set, as if in example, for his men were of surprising good cheer. Zana was instantly on his guard. Then it happened. Equipment and stores were thrown down. Manat had a weapon. He fired at Zana, hit him in

the right leg. Zana wormed his way to cover. The ranks of the prisoners broke. Wild shots and yelling echoed across the hills.

Red came bounding across the rocks, gun in hand, firing in all directions. "What's the damage, Zana?" he asked.

"It's only my leg. What about Manat?"

"He's got away with three others. Shall we go after them?"

"No." Zana propped himself up, tore strips off his tattered shirt and bound a tourniquet round his leg to stop the bleeding. "We'll never get them in the hills without running into more trouble. We must keep going upwards. How have we fared?"

Alora came across to provide the answer. "Boorman is dead," she whispered. "He wished us luck with his last words."

"We're going to need it," murmured Red. "What the hell happened, anyway?"

Alora released Zana's tourniquet and called Aloysius to bring the first-aid box.

"Never mind about me," snapped Zana. "I want to get to the bottom of this." He tried to stand, but Alora forced him down.

"You're bleeding heavily. This wound must be treated and dressed before you move on."

Aloysius joined them and confirmed her opinion. With reluctance Zana succumbed to having his wound attended. But he turned to Red. "How many did you say escaped?"

"Four, including Manat. I should have blazed at him first. I would have done if——"

"It can't be rectified now," Zana cut in. "The thing is how did it all start. Where did they get the weapons?"

"That's what I can't understand," said Red.

"Scout round the battlefield and see if there's anything to give a clue. How many weapons did they have?"

Red moved round bent low, cautiously darting from cover to cover. He was soon back, handing Zana a silver pistol.

"An E.C.B. miniature automatic," Zana whispered. "And they all seemed to have them. But how?"

Red pulled at his jaw nervously. "I think I've hit on the answer to that. We had eight prisoners. Four escaped, yet we're left with five corpses—one of them is a strange face, a newcomer."

Zana's face blanched. His wince was not entirely due to Alora's probing to extract the bullet from his leg. "Five," he murmured. "That means that somehow or other one of them from down there joined up with the prisoners."

They all stared at each other, mystified and accusing.

"Somebody hasn't kept watch properly," Red burst out angrily.

"That's about it," said Zana. His forehead was deeply wrinkled. "But we can't pin the blame on anybody, not that it would do us any good now. It means that one of them must have

skirted the rocks and got above us. Probably hid under cover and joined the E.C.B. party whilst they were on the move."

Red's narrowed eyes fixed on the hills in search of an explanation. "If that's the way it was done the intruder had plenty of guts," he admitted grudgingly. "It must have been a thousand to one on his being discovered."

"But he wasn't," put in Aloysius, mopping blood from Zana's leg.

"No," said Zana. "And if one can skirt round us so can others. There might be more up there now, waiting for us. They used miniature automatics last time. Probably because of their compactness—one man could easily conceal nine of them on his person. But I'll be very much surprised if next time we don't run into far deadlier weapons." He gasped out in pain as Alora withdrew the bullet, then sat in cogitative silence as his leg was bound up.

The climb upwards was now impeded in many ways. Apart from Zana's enforced slowness, every inch of the way had to be investigated. The equipment was sorted out so that only absolute essentials were carried—these amounted to the weighty FBX fission bricks, tools and camp equipment. The radio, stores, even weapons were tossed into deep crevasses between the rocks. The gap between Flash and the travelling party, gradually lessened. But the pain was beginning to tell on Zana.

Freed from the danger of blasting their colleagues the E.C.B. men below kept up a continual barrage of long-range shell fire. Flash was brought down from the summit and narrowly escaped being crushed by an avalanche of blasted rock. Zana ordered a complete change of direction, going crab-wise round the hills as he had done when first presenting himself to the Martians. The four Dissentizen survivors had to keep under constant cover, knowing that one chance sight of them from below would betray their position and start up a barrage of rock-blasting aimed directly at them.

Zana drove himself to the utmost, stoically resisting the agony of his leg without complaint. Indeed, his companions didn't realise the extent of his plight until he collapsed through sheer pain and exhaustion. Aloysius was the first to reach him. Taking advantage of the fact that he was temporarily unconscious, the ex-priest swiftly removed the crude bandages.

Alora was at his side in an instant. She let out a low moan of despair as she saw the filthy suppurating wound. "It's serious, isn't it?" she said.

Aloysius glanced at her, his bright eyes glowing with alarm through the profuse black hair which seemed to cover the whole of his face. "Gangrene," he whispered. "The leg will have to be amputated if he is to live."

"But we can't do it here." Her face was wrinkled with shock, her fingers restively anxious.

"There's still some morphia left. Alora, gather your senses. I'm going to cut off the leg now while he's still out. Heat some water on the chemical stove. I'll sharpen my knife."

Flash had been looking on in a dazed stupor. He now moved forward and grabbed Aloysius by the shoulder. "You can't do it under these conditions," he cried. "You'll kill him."

Aloysius began sharpening his knife on a smooth stretch of stone. "He'll die if I *don't* do it," he said emphatically.

"Don't you think he ought to know that you're going to do it?" put in Billy, staring down at Zana's pain-creased face.

"I don't know if he'll come round. Maybe we're too late already. Hurry up with the water, Alora."

Zana stirred. Billy dropped down on his knees, douching his friend's face with cold water, trying to revive him. "Zana! Zana!" he whispered.

The heavy eyes flickered open.

"Zana, you're in a bad way, old son," murmured Billy.

"I'm all right," croaked Zana, trying to force himself up.

Billy held him gently but firmly. "It's your leg. Aloysius reckons your only chance is to have it off."

The eyes opened with a flutter of urgency. "We haven't enough time. We must push on. I'm done for, you leave me. Get to the *Asselyra*. Tell . . . tell . . . tell Flash . . . I want Flash . . . tell him to how to launch the *Asselyra* . . . tell him that . . ."

"He's gone again," said Billy.

Aloysius was ready with the knife. "Well?" he said, looking at the other two.

"Do you think there's any chance for him?" asked Billy.

"Of course." Aloysius was sorting calmly through the first-aid box.

"He's given up hope for himself," pressed Billy. "He must be bad to do that."

"It's not surprising in his condition. He's driven himself to the last ounce of his energy."

Alora crawled up to them with hot water.

"He came round," said Billy, feeling that he had to discuss it with her.

"Well?"

"He told us to leave him."

"But we can't," she protested.

"Of course not," said Aloysius. "Here, Billy, sterilise this knife while I give him the shot in the arm."

With a quick unexpected movement Flash grabbed at the knife and hurled it across the rocks shouting, "You can't do it."

"You stupid fool!" rasped Aloysius, clutching him savagely

by the shoulders. He shook him until the fire of his anger cooled, then pushed him so that he sprawled across the rocks. "Do you think I'm going to amputate our leader's leg for the fun of the thing. It's the only way of saving his life, get that into your blockhead." He advanced towards him, upright, too highly aroused to remember the need of cover. "Now go and get that knife back unless you want to be responsible for taking Zana's life. Move, and hurry before you're too late!"

When Flash returned he was quick to apologise, but his face was deathly white. "Can you manage without me?" he asked. "I'd rather not see it."

"Grow up," snapped Aloysius. "I need you to hold him down. There's only a little morphia; it might not be enough to keep him still. Position yourself opposite Billy. You've caused enough delay already."

Aloysius genuflected, then picked up the knife. "Hold him tight, you two," he said, forcing his words through gritted teeth. "Alora, the hot water.'

The next few minutes were so absorbing that they completely forgot that they were hiding from an enemy: It was Billy Brown who looked up suddenly and saw a grey-uniformed sniper taking aim at them. It was too late to draw his own weapon, so he merely flung himself across Zana to protect him. He was just in time, for the heat flash spat out and crumpled him into a moaning heap which soon gurgled to death and silence.

Flash leapt to his feet, blasting away in the direction from which the attack came. The sniper retreated. Paying no head to Aloysius's warning, Flash went after him, finding relief in the opportunity of letting off steam. His heart burned with hatred of the E.C.B. It became imperative that he got his man, but thoughts of Zana tempered his movements with caution. Crouching low, he sprang from rock to rock with the stealth and surefootedness of an animal stalking its prey.

Alora bandaged up the jagged stump of Zana's leg, then darted from the spot under the pretext of looking out for Flash. Once out of sight she was violently sick, so overcome with emotion that when the sickness subsided she burst into deep, body-ahuddering tears.

As he returned from his man-hunt, Flash found her sprawled face downwards on the hard rock. "Alora!" he whispered. He knelt down beside her and put his arm round her shoulders.

She lifted her tear-stained face and smiled sheepishly. "I'm afraid I've been behaving like a woman," she said.

"I'm glad," he murmured. "I could have wept myself. Instead, I killed a man."

She took hold of his hands and held them tight. "He killed one of our friends," she reminded him. "Would probably have

killed the lot of us if you hadn't gone after him."

Flash nodded.

"You're so very young for all this," she said softly.

He stared into her dark eyes, was on the point of saying something, then jumped up suddenly.

"Keep down, Flash," she warned.

He dropped quickly and she moved across to him, letting her hand rest on his shoulder.

"Let's get back to Zana," he said. It wasn't what he wanted to say, but he knew it to be the best under the circumstances.

They found Aloysius still solicitously tending the needs of his patient.

"How is he?" asked Flash.

"Still running a high temperature and weak from the loss of blood. It will be sometime before we are able to move him."

Flash shrugged his shoulders and grinned. "Then we'd better dig in here for a while," he said. "The long night will soon be upon us. It will give Zana time to recuperate."

"And the enemy time to creep up on us," warned Alora.

"Not if we conceal our position. We'll have to keep a constant watch for snipers, but we have the vantage point. They'll have to carry lights to travel in numbers. We'll soon spot any concentration." Flash lay on his back, fully outstretched, pillowing his head in his hands. "I think we're safe here for a while. The one who knew our position didn't get back, nor will any other snoopers."

"Has Zana come round at all?" asked Alora.

"Once," said Aloysius.

"He knows what you've done?"

The ex-priest nodded.

"Did he say anything?"

"Nothing sensible, only repeated that we ought to leave him."

"Do you think he'll last out?"

Aloysius's eyes focused hard on her as he said, "I think he stands as good a chance as any of us."

She smiled grimly, her mouth set in a thin, tight line. "You two have had a gruelling time. I'll take the first watch while you rest."

Flash was already asleep.

The planetoid was soon plunged into complete darkness. The torches had to be darkened and used only when absolutely necessary, for Flash estimated that the long-life atomic batteries were nearing the end of their usefulness. They had to be conserved for any possible emergency.

Zana's progress was slow and irksome. Most of the time he remained in a stupor, but during his rational moments he urged them to leave him. Sporadic lights at the foot of the hills indicated that the bulk of the E.C.B. men were not making their way upwards in the engulfing darkness. They also seemed to appreciate the vantage point of their enemy. Manat would know that they couldn't make much progress without giving their position away. Everything came to rest on the return of the light.

It was still dark when Zana called his friends around him. He propped himself up against the rocks, refusing all assistance as hands stabbed out of the blackness to help him. Flash was beside him, a torch swathed in thick black cloth. "Put the light out, sit down and listen to me," said Zana. His voice was weak and tremulous.

"Don't overtax yourself," warned Alora.

"Don't fuss," he snapped, with a momentary burst of vigour. "I am still your leader. You still take orders from me, even if I am one-legged."

"None of us have disputed that," said Aloysius softly.

Zana's voice wavered. "I know," he said. "I couldn't have hand-picked better comrades." He halted for a moment, everything was eerily still. "But this is not the time for handing out bouquets. I want to formulate a plan."

"Go ahead," said Flash.

They heard him wriggle into a new position. "You have stubbornly refused to leave me behind, which would have been your best move. I thank you for that loyalty. Aloysius once told us that if we lost our human sense of values we would lose everything. Maybe he was right. Anyway, I think he can be satisfied that you have not lost your bonds of fellowship." Again he halted. He gasped a little as he went on, "But we must reach the *Asselyra* to stand a chance of survival and accomplishing our original aim. There are only four of us, or three and a half, for I am utterly dependent upon you. As soon as we move into the sun, however, we must continue upwards. That's what the enemy will also have in mind, so we're going to be hard pressed to outwit them. I don't intend holding you up any more than I can help. I'll make a pair of crutches and hobble along as fast as I can. But in spite of the best intentions in the world I might not make it, that's got to be faced."

"Well?" said Flash.

"The onus then falls on you, my lad. You become the most experienced space traveller. It is you who will have to install the fission bricks, launch the *Asselyra* and pilot her into outer space."

"Zana, you're overdoing it," whispered Alora. "You'd better rest now."

"I'm all right, thinking clearly," he said. "Once I drop off I might wake befuddled. Let me tell you this while I can. Listen, Flash, take in every word. Your future depends upon these instructions."

They sat in the darkness, a canopy of stars above them, listening to Zana's hesitant voice, knowing that he would tell them everything even if it killed him.

The light came with the abruptness of the snapping of an electric switch. Flash went out and made a quick survey of their surroundings. Below he saw signs of febrile activity, then something which caused his heart to leap and stomach strike hollow. During the night period the E.C.B. men had assembled a tractor blister, which they were now trying out. With the telescope glued to his eye, Flash saw that it looked like a tangle of endless belts but its awkward appearance belied the power of its performance, for he watched it climb and twist and fall over the rocks with depressing effectiveness. It was like looking at a monument of Dissentizen failure. They had been lucky to keep off the enemy snipers, but it was plain that if the E.C.B. had mechanised their forces only one possible outcome could result.

With a low moan of despair, Flash made his way back to the others. Zana insisted on coming to see the tractor, half-dragging and half-crawling along as he clung to Flash's shoulder. The sight of the tractor struck a similar death knell on him.

"We've got to destroy it," he said.

"But how?" asked Flash. "It's probably bullet-proof, heat-proof and every other proof under the sun."

Zana looked at him and suddenly forced a smile. "Dynamite," he whispered.

"You mean the charges you set on the summit in case the Martians rushed us?"

"Exactly. We must get it down and set a trap for the tractor. Remember the old hat on a stick principle?"

Flash stroked his chin in doubt. "It's a bit too much to hope for that to work again," he said.

"Not if we go about it the right way." Pain creased his face, but Zana forced himself to raise the necessary strength to make plans.

Doubt continued to etch its way across Flash's features, but he did not express it. "Well, shall I go after the dynamite?" he asked.

"No, we need you here to defend our position. We must be absolutely ruthless from now on and Aloysius hasn't enough hate in his soul to be ruthless. He can bring the dynamite down."

Zana was all in; his breathing fast, face flushed with pain and exertion.

Flash glanced at him and feared the worst. "I'd better carry you back," he said.

Zana was fatigued beyond pretence. He clung tight to Flash, becoming more and more aware of his helplessness. They reached the rock retreat and before succumbing to the effects of exhaustion, Zana said, "There's a job for you, Aloysius. Flash, tell him all he ought to know."

Later Aloysius set out for the summit. All was quiet below him. The E.C.B. seemed to have dispensed with the use of snipers. But the tractor came up the hills in a slow but remorseless advance. It was obvious that Manat was pinning all his faith on his mechanised weapon, thinking that the Dissentizens had nothing powerful enough to combat it. Then Flash spotted two advancing grey-uniformed figures, merely caught a glimpse of them a mile or so down the hills, out of range of small arms fire. Not that they remained an easy target, for they soon darted under cover. But it meant they were advancing nearer.

"We've got to push on upwards," said Flash to Alora sharply. "If we don't beat that tractor to the top of the hills we're finished."

"But Zana isn't fit to push on," she protested.

"It makes no odds. He'll die if we leave him behind, so he might as well take his chance with us. If he goes down on the move, then he's lost nothing. But our chances of escape will be increased. We're down to the bare fundamentals now, Alora. We can't sit here and wait to be trapped."

And so they moved off, struggling and clawing their way through the gaps in the rocks, seeking the easiest routes which afforded the maximum amount of cover. Aloysius joined up with them again and the carrying of the dynamite became an increased burden. Failure seemed to be hemming them in on all sides as the tractor continued its advance.

Aloysius now led the party upwards. Flash and Alora supported Zana, dragging and carrying him as he moaned and gasped with the unavoidable jolts and bumps. In negotiating a wide crevass they almost let the burden slip their grip. Alora cried out in alarm. Aloysius stood upright, glancing back to see the cause of the trouble. A blast of explosive spat out and Aloysius crumpled. It needed no investigation to prove that he was dead.

"Now we are three," whispered Flash. "And those swine are too near for my liking. Watch Zana, Alora. I'm going after them. They must be cut off."

"Flash, be careful," she called out.

He turned and grinned; a wry, quivering smile without any humour. He acknowledged with an attempt at a jaunty salute, but set off with face lined with grim endeavour.

Darting from cover to cover, Flash again hunted down the enemy with cold-blooded ruthlessness. He caught one of them unawares and shot him on the spot. The other meeting was equally surprising, but Flash was this time caught unprepared. It was a case of who was the quickest on the trigger. Practice at killing had speeded Flash's reflexes and he returned to his friends victorious but not triumphant.

Zana was in a rational state, but seemed to be weakening, nearing the last. "You're back, Flash?" he murmured, forcing a smile. "Were you successful?"

Flash nodded. "But we're fighting a losing battle, Zana."

"You are as long as you drag me along with you."

"I thought we'd settled all that!" snapped Flash.

Zana beckoned to him to come closer. "We had, assuming that I made progress, Flash. Now you must face up to facts. In spite of all your attention I'm coming to the end. I can't last. If you drag me along I'll die on the way and prejudice your chance. If you persist in your stubbornness, you defeat all we have worked for and all your comrades died for."

Alora glanced at Flash. "He's right," she whispered.

"I can't leave him. Good God, haven't I done enough killing. Surely you don't expect me to turn on Zana?"

"Your only hope is leaving me. I *want* you to leave me," pleaded Zana. "I'm going to die anyway, Flash. My hours are numbered. You must see sense. You can accomplish my mission —that will be my epitaph. Only through you can I succeed. Please, both of you. These are my dying words, leave me and respect my last wishes. If you take me with you, you'll have a corpse on your hands and you'll probably never reach the *Asselyra*. You must make up your minds quick, for we have to travel further yet."

Alora and Flash spoke to each other in whispered undertones. Zana feigned ignorance, but he was aware of what they were discussing. He also knew that their only hope was to leave him. He called out to them weakly. "We must move," he said. "It will soon be too late."

"Are you sure you want in this way, Zana?" murmured Flash.

The reply came thin and gasping. "It's the only way."

"All right," rapped Flash. "Then we'll go."

A quivering smile of contentment twitched Zana's lips. His end was not as near as be led them to believe, but this *was* the only way.

On the journey upwards he outlined his plan with deliberate hardship, fighting for breath, when although racked with pain he could have breathed easier. Flash was in constant doubt. Alora's dark eyes were also intent and searching as Zana explained what he bad in mind.

"Take me to the smooth channel of rock leading to the cleft in the two peaks. The tractor is almost certain to be taken up there because it is the easiest route. Plant the dynamite charge there, then leave me propped up. I'll do my best to hold anybody off for as long as I can, but you can't rely on much. Once you hear the dynamite blow up you know that you've very little time to make the ship. If you get to the *Asselyra* before it goes off, then fit the bricks and launch without delay. You remember all the instructions, Flash?"

He nodded, struggling with the huge lump in his throat.

They reached the planned spot. "Don't worry, Flash," croaked Zana. "I could never make it, but *you* must. Set the dynamite for an impact detonation, then get away."

Still Flash lingered. Zana played the death deception to the end. "Go," he whispered. "I can't cover you for long."

Alora bent down and kissed him, tears streaming down her high cheek bones. "There's so much I want to say," she murmured.

"Go," he muttered, wincing with pain. "Good luck."

Flash bent down and shook his hand. His eyes were not far from tears. "I wish it could have been different," he said, in a half sob.

"Once you get over the hills don't waste a second," warned Zana. "Get there for my sake, Flash. I always wanted to reach beyond the solar system. Good luck, boy."

Flash left hurriedly, dragging Alora with him, both bent down in caution. They turned and waved before disappearing behind a huge face of gleaming white rock. Zana raised his hand with an exaggerated laboured effort. Then they were gone, leaving him to face death alone.

Zana lay back and rested for a while, then he wormed himself into a position where he could watch any upward advance. The tractor was still quite a way below; it seemed to have been in difficulties. In a brief exchange of shots Zana accounted for another sniper. Silence and inactivity followed. The casualty rate of snipers must have been sapping at the morale of the E.C.B. men. Zana assumed that they were now concentrating everything on the tractor. He changed his position and established himself beside the dynamite detonator, so that his body when run over by the tractor would detonate the charge. He knew that he had not got long to live. but he had no intention of allowing Manat to take him alive.

Precious time passed, all of it enabling Flash to get nearer the ship. The E.C.B. delay in attacking looked like being the decisive factor. Then Zana heard the tractor motors approaching. To reach the channel leading to the cleft it had to go over a slight ledge. Here Zana positioned himself, out of sight, lying flat with the dynamite beneath him. Once the wheels touched

him it would be the end of the tractor, of its E.C.B. crew, of Zana Dench, but not of the Dissentizens.

The noise of the motor grew louder, but before it reached the trap prepared for it, Zana had his final consolation, for with a scream of supersonic noise the *Asselyra* whooshed out into the blackness of space. This sound had not died away before the hills shook with an explosion which started a cascade of splitting white rocks rolling down the hillside. The victory, even in death, was complete.

In the *Asselyra*, Flash cut the main jets and set the gravity rotators. The ship coasted smoothly and they were able to relax. Flash had plotted a course and set the navigational instruments to maintain it. They didn't know where it would take them, neither did they particularly care. They were alive, which is more than they would have been if captured by the E.C.B Even if they had been taken back to Earth they would have suffered in order that they could be pointed at as an example to others. Nine Dissentizens had left their home planet to find freedom; two of them remained to complete the mission, to establish a home on one of the multitude of specks which stood out like tiny beacons In tbe vastness of space, a star of their own.

Alora went across the cabin and snuggled beside Flash. His arm slowly encircled her waist as he smiled into her upturned eyes.

"You can kiss me now," she said.

He bent down and pressed his mouth against her cool lips with loving tenderness. "I've wanted to do that for a long time," he murmured.

"I know," she whispered. "And you were the only one I wanted, Flash. No matter what had happened to the others you would have been the father of my children."

They clung together happily, staring out of the observation port at the majesty of star-flecked space. Through them the Dissentizens would live on, their children would perpetuate the movement. They would continue in a new world when Earthmen had long forgotten the meaning of freedom.

THE END.

You can't dance?

Put yourself in the hands of this instructor

With 45 practical photographs and many easy-to-follow diagrams

•

Learn the Waltz, Slow Foxtrot, Quickstep, and the Tango this easy way

ONLY 3/6

☆ *Right up-to-date edition. The book which has ... ight tens of thousands to dance*

FROM ALL BOOKSELLERS

In case of difficulty 3s. 9d. by post from address below—

PEARSON Tower House, Southampton Street, London, W.C.2.

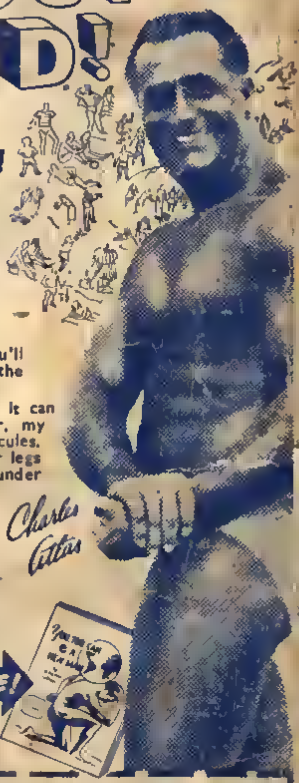
Printed and bound in England by William Stevens Ltd., Yorkshire Printing Works, York, for the Publishers C. Arthur Pearson Ltd., Tower House, Southampton Street, London, W.C.2

I'll prove in only 7 DAYS that I can make you...

STAND OUT IN A CROWD!

. . . or it won't cost you a penny!

FED up with being only half a man? Do you want big muscles and a he-man build that will make you stand out in a crowd? I've got the answer—"Dynamic-Tension". In only one week you'll see results.



WHAT'S MY SECRET

Imagine the confidence a man draws from a powerful build. You'll find yourself the lucky one who wins the best-paid job, has the best-looking girl round your way!

What this secret, easy-to-follow training method did for me, it can do for you! From a puny, weak-chested back-number, my "Dynamic-Tension" will develop you into a modern Hercules. It will put big inches on your chest and biceps—swell your legs into perfect proportions. And as the muscles begin to ripple under your skin you'll feel the glow of new, complete health.

Here's what "DYNAMIC-TENSION" did for me!

Charles Atlas

As a kid and in young manhood I was a sickly scarecrow. They used to call me "Old Bag-of-Bones". You know that feeling of rage and despair that made me look for an answer—for a build and health I could be proud of. And at last I found it! "Dynamic-Tension", as I call my easy system, made a new man of me. It gave me the body that twice won the coveted title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man".

SEND FOR MY 32-PAGE BOOK *FREE!*

Send for my book that tells my story—and the stories of my pupils. Read how I made HE-MAN out of them. See what I can do for you. Post coupon to **CHARLES ATLAS (Dept. 201 K), 2, Dean Street, LONDON, W.1.**

Here's PROOF from some of my Pupils!

"With your system you actually see one's muscles grow day by day."
D.H., Bournemouth

"Gained 17½ inches in measurements. Can lift 8 h.p. car from ground."
V.M., Blackpool

CHARLES ATLAS

(Dept. 201/K), 2 Dean Street, London, W.1.

Send me your 32-page book, "You, Too, Can Be a New Man" FREE, and details of your amazing 7-DAY TRIAL OFFER.

NAME .....
(Capital Letters please)

ADDRESS .....

.....

.....